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**The rural-based artist in Britain and Thailand: An investigation  
into the creative processes by which artists have rejected the  
metropolitan context of contemporary art**

***Apichart Pholprasert***

**PhD**

**2006**

**The rural-based artist in Britain and Thailand: An investigation  
into the creative processes by which artists have rejected the  
metropolitan context of contemporary art**

***Apichart Pholprasert***

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the University of  
Northumbria at Newcastle for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Fine art

Research undertaken in the School of Arts and Social Sciences

**January 2006**

## Abstract

In my home country there has been an assumption that innovative art is entirely an urban affair. As a result, Thai artists treat the city of Bangkok as a point of cultural focus modelled on Western art capitals such as New York and London. However, in the UK there is a thriving non-metropolitan art culture in which progressive and experimental practices are promoted in rural areas. Given that many Thai artists grow up in agricultural villages (and often explore rural topics in their art) it seems strange that Thailand has no viable alternative to the metropolitan model.

My research project has developed new forms of creative practice for rural-based art in Thailand using practical and philosophical approaches derived from Western art. The methodology I have applied to this challenge has involved the dis-location of my practice in both urban and rural areas. During my doctoral project I have produced artworks on the City Campus at Northumbria University and in Banpao, my home village in northeast Thailand where I have pioneered one of the first rural art centres in my country.

The body of practical work documented in this thesis is a synthesis of the processes of painting and agricultural work. The images are digitally manipulated photographic collages printed on the kind of canvas support I used when I began my career as a painter in Bangkok. Alongside this practical submission, my thesis begins by describing the contemporary urban/rural divide that allows us to continue to define an area of arts practice as 'rural-based'. I then move on to examine the homesickness and nostalgia that is conventionally said to motivate ruralism. I explore the desire to retreat from the problems of city life in relation to British art and, following a section on present-day life in my home village, the artists working in Bangkok who most epitomise the problems of making rural art in Thailand today.

The conclusion to the thesis is reached through an engagement with Proustian reverie, Theravada Buddhism, environmental aesthetics and the philosophy of John Dewey. This leads me to speculate on the aspects of ruralism that make the British version so forward-looking and experimental. As a result, I am able to describe how nostalgia-driven forms of expression do not automatically produce sentimental artworks and propose an approach to rural art that could still carry a great deal of creative resonance for contemporary Thai artists.

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Lastly I thank my parents, my grandmother and Banpao villagers for their warm welcome and energetic cooperation in my project. It is my hope that the rural art centre I developed during this research will benefit their community.

## **Declaration**

I declare that the work contained in this thesis has not been submitted for other award and that it is all my own work.

I also confirm that I have completed an appropriate training programme in agreement with the School Research Committee and in accordance with the regulatory requirements of the University of Northumbria at Newcastle.

Apichart Pholprasert

## Introduction

### The Difficulty of Rural Art: Introducing my Concerns as an Artist

The metropolitan environment has been the main platform for significant developments in the modern history of art in the West and beyond. Major cities such as Paris, New York, Vienna, Moscow and London have, at different times, been the pioneering sites for 'paradigm shifts in modern art' (Blazwick, 2001:7).

Art about the opposite of city life (that is, the rural environment) has almost certainly developed in association with the progressive nature of urban culture. Images of the countryside were 'deeply bound into the crystallisation of a powerful metropolitan ideology' (Green, 1990:11)<sup>1</sup>.

The art historian, Malcolm Andrews (1999) observes that, since ancient times, the natural landscape was:

a refuge from the pressure of city, court, and political life [...] Early Christian anchorites and Renaissance humanists celebrated the experience of solitude and spiritual refreshment afforded by pastoral retreats (p.151).

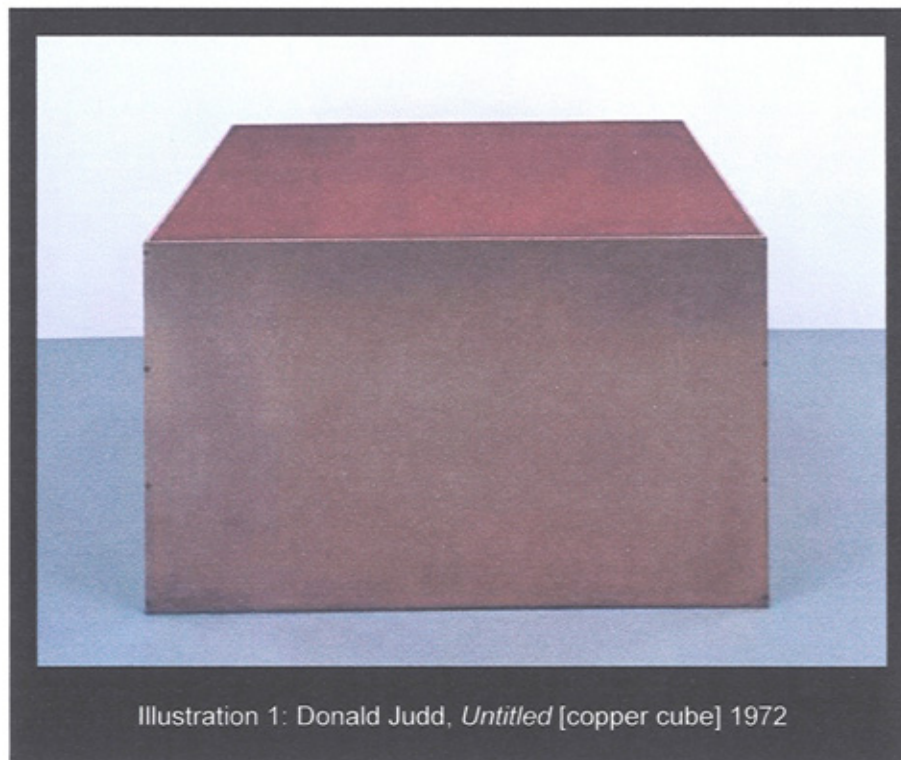
[...]Open-air painting in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries has taken the artist out of the studio to a more intimate and sustained confrontation with the [rural] site. But it was usually assumed that such an engagement was part of a process: it was a deliberate excursion in order to enhance the authority of [the artists'] record of the site [...] an excursion *from* the studio and eventually *back into* the studio (pp. 201-202).

Only after the emergence of Earth Art and Land Art in the 1960s have artists begun to value rural locations in their own right, producing artistic forms and concepts in parallel to city-based art. For example, even art movements with a strong urban identity such as minimalism had, according to Andrews (1999), both metropolitan and landscape applications (p.204).

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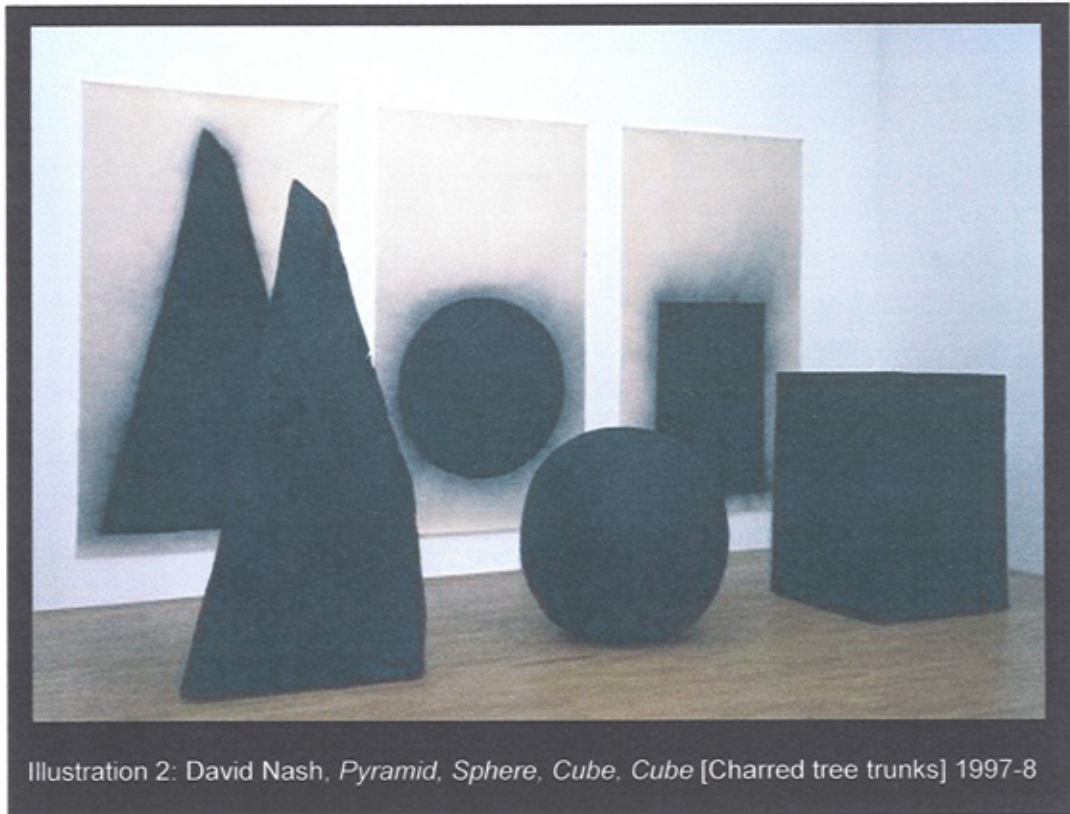
<sup>1</sup> In his book, *The Spectacle of Nature*, Nicholas Green argues that the way city dwellers, for example nineteenth century Parisians, looked at countryside reinforced the identity of the metropolitan bourgeoisie.

David Nash, a British sculptor who left London to settle in a remote village in North Wales, has worked in a minimalist fashion since the 1970s. There are noticeable similarities between his woodland sculptures and the simple sets of geometric shapes found in paradigmatic minimalist artists such as Donald Judd. Nash says that during his first exhibition in America, a critic called his work 'rural minimalism'<sup>2</sup>. This seems to be an appropriate title. Nash sees sculptural beauty in simple structures and forms and his artworks share a formal clarity with Judd [Illustration 1-2]. For example, both artists have produced objects that are uncompromising in their lack of complication.



---

<sup>2</sup> My unpublished interview with David Nash in November 2001 at his studio in North Wales.



However, Nash does not value the association because artists such as Judd promote simplicity through an enthusiasm for industrial blandness. The sophisticated technology used to produce Judd's sculptures evokes, for Nash, an environmental issue. Minimalism celebrates processes that pollute the environment; it co-opts the aspects of industrial manufacture that Nash strives to avoid. Thus Nash has an ecological dimension to his pursuit of purity and simplicity of form. It is not, for him, the same project pursued by the Minimalists and his flight from the metropolitan art world is clearly of a piece with this mission.

It is interesting that critics can contextualise Nash's activities within a progressive and internationally influential art movement whilst the artist himself adopts (at both practical and theoretical levels) an anti-metropolitan position that would, if historians of contemporary culture (e.g. Blazwick) are to be believed, disqualify participation in the progress of modern art.

The example of David Nash provides a good introduction to my own concerns as an artist and to the doctoral research project that has grown out of my struggle with the city-bound identity of contemporary art. Like the majority of



Thai artists I was born in a regional village and moved to Bangkok when I became ambitious for a career in the arts. From my remote home in northeast Thailand, the capital city was, without question, the best place to undertake training and then, after graduation, practice as a professional artist.

However, unlike the rest of the arts community in Bangkok I found it difficult to ignore the pull of my rural origins. I wondered if it was possible for an artist to mix contemporary life with rurality. I started to look for non-metropolitan role-models amongst the artists with international reputations and discovered practitioners like David Nash<sup>3</sup> and artists' groups like the Brotherhood of Ruralists (which included Peter Blake who had a very high profile within the field of Pop Art)<sup>4</sup>. It seemed to me that Britain was the place to learn about rural-based practices that have viability within the international art world.

Perhaps it is inevitable that, in order to take a new position on rurality and contemporary art I had to look (as has so often happened in the past) to the West. In Thailand, by definition, innovation seems to involve the transposition of Western ideas. In this sense the doctoral project I set up at Northumbria University follows a historical pattern. Thai artists have been greatly influenced by Western art practices since colonisation spread across Southeast Asia from the mid-nineteenth century onwards (Clark, 1993). The main method of absorbing Western art into a Thai context has been by adapting European or North American styles to express ideas about Thai life.

Although Thailand escaped colonisation by Western powers, the country regarded "modernisation" to Western standards as an important enterprise. The process of creating a modern nation state was achieved by instituting revolutionary changes that established the authority of a centralized bureaucracy throughout the country (Keges, 1987). In the first half of twentieth century, the modernity of Thailand (called Siam prior to 1939) developed dramatically. Thai rulers used art in support of the nation's determination to correspond to the Western image of a modern and civilized country. European artists were hired to produce Western styles of art in a Thai context. Thai artists

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<sup>3</sup> See Andrews, J. (1999)

<sup>4</sup> See Nahum (2005), Usherwood (1981), and Martin, ed. (1991)

had opportunities to study art in the Western manner when a School of Fine Arts was founded in 1933 (and granted university status in 1943 under the name Silpakorn University). This school was directed by Corrado Feroci (1892-1962), a Florentine sculptor who was appointed by King Vajiravudh (1880-1925)<sup>5</sup>. Feroci remained in Thailand for the rest of his life, becoming a Thai citizen in 1944 and changing his name to Silpa Bhirasri. Bhirasri laid out the curriculum at Silpakorn using the model of an Italian art academy. He aimed to produce artisan-artists who could practice in both fine and applied arts. Bhirasri, who trained at the Accademia di Belle Arti in Florence, thought that his students should learn the fundamental skills of drawing, painting, sculpture and even architecture before adopting the practices of the modern artists. There was a small component of modernism; for example students were introduced to Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, Cubism and Futurism. Otherwise, students followed the conventional academic procedures of drawing life models and plaster casts, making watercolour studies and painting landscapes after nature. (Poshyananda, 1992: 33-35)<sup>6</sup>.

Bhirasri is remembered today as the father of modern art in Thailand. He established an educational platform for young artists that paralleled the art school programmes available in the West during the 1940s and 1950s. At Silpakorn University, art students could absorb a conventional approach and then, as their confidence grew, reject established traditions and embrace a modernist style. With this system in place Thai artists were given the same framework for development that fostered Western experimentalism from Manet in the 1860s to the Young British Artists (YBA) in the late 1980s. The crucial difference was that Bhirasri strove to set Western teaching practices alongside the Thai classical tradition. For example, his painting students were expected to synthesise Buddhist traditions and Western concepts, techniques and materials.

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<sup>5</sup> King Vajiravudh was the first Thai King to study abroad. He went to England at the age of eleven and spent a total of nine years in Britain. After acquiring competency in English through personal tutors, he commenced his formal education at Sandhurst Military Academy and served briefly with the British Army. In 1899, he entered Christ Church College, Oxford to study history and law. King Vajiravudh had a passion for painting and played an important role in developing and promoting Thai art.

<sup>6</sup> See also Bhirasri (1954, 1960, and 1989).

To this day, the dominant characteristics of progressive art in Thailand can be understood as a tactical rejuvenation of historic Thai culture using imported Western ideas (Phillips, 1992; Poshyananda, 1992; and Clark, ed., 1993)<sup>7</sup>. The leading contemporary artist of this type is Chalermchai Kositpipat (born 1955) who led a group of Thai artists in a mural project at the Buddhapratipa temple in Wimbledon, London, during the 1980s [Illustration 3]. The murals depict conventional Buddhist subjects such as the birth of the Buddha, Nirvana, and the defeat of Mara. Whilst maintaining the Thai classical form of representation, Chalermchai used vivid acrylic colours instead of subdued tempera (Cate, 2002, Poshyananda, 1992: 199). In doing this, a new style of temple painting was inaugurated.



Illustration 3: *The Defeat of Mara*, a mural in Buddhapratipa temple

<sup>7</sup> The most comprehensive history of the development of modern art in Thailand is Apinan Poshyananda's book, *Modern Art in Thailand: Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (1992). Developed out of his PhD dissertation at Cornell University, this book examines the eclecticism that characterises modern Thai art, and demonstrates how Buddhism, folk cultures, local traditions, and foreign influences have been a catalyst in the development of modern styles of Thai art.



After the Wimbledon project Chalermchai continued to develop his approach by mixing Buddhist and secular themes. Chalermchai's work often explores the tensions between spirituality and contemporary society. *Mind to Mind*, 1994 [Illustration 4] offers an example. The central image is a nun standing on an angel's hand. At the top left corner is a yellow moon painted in a Thai classical style. However this painting takes a traditional iconography (the mind purified through meditation rising above the material world) and resituates it in a modern city (represented by skyscrapers). Chalermchai's work has become popular with art collectors in Thailand.



Illustration 4: Chalermchai Kositpipat *Mind to Mind*, 1994

Perhaps it is because Chalermchai turns Buddhist beliefs into easy-to-understand contemporary images that his approach has provided a model for

artists producing paintings for the economically important Thai tourist industry. In this sense the example set by Chalermchai's innovations turn out to be little more than an opportunity for crass commercialism.

Because of its historical depth, relative distinctiveness<sup>8</sup> and association with the court and the temple, classical art has become virtually a logo for Thailand. [It has been used for] decorating hotels and restaurants, greeting cards, shopping bags, T-shirts and other tourist mementos. A few artists who specialize in classical work have developed their own distinctive styles, and responded to the wave of nostalgia and nationalism that has swept through Thailand in recent years [...]. However, for all its beauty, grace, and popularity, classical art is an inherently uncreative enterprise (Phillips, 1992: 18-19).

Needless to say, there are now many artists who want to break free from traditional styles and their tainted associations with tourist clichés. They want to fully embrace Western experimentalism and be accepted in the international art world.

Nevertheless the 'National Artist'<sup>9</sup>, Damrong Wong Upa-Raj continues to criticise Thai artists for their opportunism and believes that commercially-oriented practices hinder the cultural development of Thailand because once a practitioner is successful they are less likely to change the style of their work<sup>10</sup>. Similarly, Phillips (1996) points out that the desire to preserve Thai traditions makes it difficult for artists to discover and sustain creative freedom (pp. 26 – 27). It seems that Bhirasri's synthesis of Western and Thai approaches has prevented contemporary artists from operating in genuinely Modernist and Postmodern modes. In fact, Bhirasri was probably responsible for inhibiting the Thai engagement with Western art movements. In a rather patronising fashion, he believed that the developments in European and North American art following the First World War (for example, Expressionism and Surrealism) were alien to the Thai aesthetic spirit. As a consequence, during the 1940s and 1950s, Thai art was operating at least two decades behind the West (Phillips,

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<sup>8</sup> Phillips says "relative" because he sees classical Thai art as closely related to the classical Khmer, Lao and Burmese traditions.

<sup>9</sup> "National Artist" is an award granted to honour artists who have committed themselves to their specialised subjects for a long period of time, and whose work has made a significant contribution to the development of Thai art and literature as a whole. (Reference: National Committee for Organising the Celebrations of the 50th Anniversary of His Majesty's Accession to the Throne. 2nd ed. (1997). Rattanakosin Art: The Reign of King Rama IX. Bangkok: Amarin Printing and Publishing., p. 203)

<sup>10</sup> My unpublished interview with Damrong in December 2001

1992). Phillips has commented that artists have been drawn into the Thai campaign to emulate Western inventiveness but problems have arisen when the practices taken to be innovative and progressive are out of date. For instance, whilst the international art world was absorbing and evaluating the stylistic inventions of American abstract expressionist painters such as Jackson Pollock, Thai artists were still busy with the legacy of European post-impressionism. A growing awareness of the time-lapse between Thailand and the West has led to reactionary criticism: the whole business of imitating Western art is said to leave Thai art 'looking less than creative', 'lacking in identity' and 'without internal resourcefulness' (Phillips, 1992; and Bhirasri, 1989).

Nevertheless, since the 1980s, many contemporary forms of Western art have been introduced and, as a result, a growing number of fine art departments have been created within newly established universities both in Bangkok and in the regional cities. Silapakorn's (and Bhirasri) dominance has gradually declined. Influential tutors in the new art academies, who have been educated in America, Germany, France and Britain, encourage students to explore contemporary social and environmental issues through new artistic processes and media, such as installation and video art. The most influential artist in this area was Montien Boonma (1953-2000). His work was included in several international art events, including the 51<sup>st</sup> Venice Biennial International Art Exhibition, 2005 [Illustration 5].





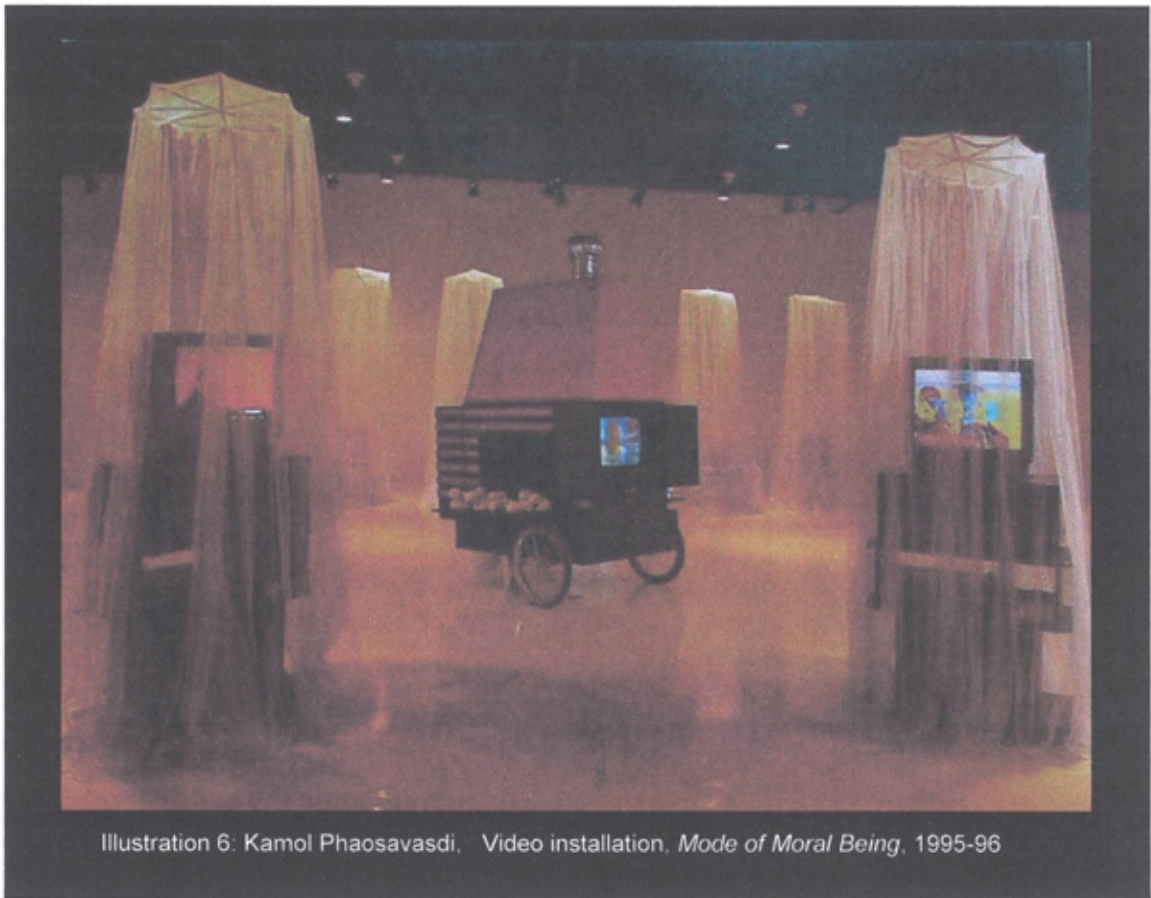
Montien's installations during the last decade of his life drew inspiration from his Buddhist faith. Using the atmospheric and poetic potential of the installation technique he created evocative spaces of refuge and peace. These works generated an interesting combination of ancient spiritual intuitions and contemporary thinking (Poshyananda, 2003). Given Montien's search for a Buddhist release through art, it is interesting that his experiments did not lead to a disengagement with metropolitan life and an embracing of nature within simple rural surroundings<sup>11</sup>. Montien spent his life in Bangkok and exhibited in the art capitals of Asia, Europe and North America. He never thought of working within (or for) a rural community.

Another well-established artist who has fully engaged with installation and multi-media art is Kamol Phaosavasdi (born 1958). Kamol has exhibited throughout Asia and his practice addresses environmental, political and social issues. For

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<sup>11</sup> Later in the thesis I will discuss the relationship between ruralism and Buddhism in the context of two other Bangkok artists.

example, *Mode of Moral Being* (1995 - 96) explores the problem of prostitution in Bangkok. [Illustration 6]



With the political topicality of Kamol's installations comes the inevitable celebration of urban society that characterises the international art scene. Kamol has not explored the possibilities of working in an experimental fashion outside the metropolitan context of Bangkok even though he has made pieces about environmental issues (for example, his *Repercussions of Agriculture* of 1991) [Illustration 7]. In making artworks that challenge the increasing use of chemicals by farmers, Kamol clearly aligns himself with the urban communities that disapprove of the industrialisation of rural life.





Illustration 7: Kamol Phaosavasdi  
*Repercussions of Agriculture*, 1992

For the current generation of Thai artists, the desire to contribute to international debates within the arts has excluded a direct engagement with present-day rural life even though Thailand remains a predominately rural society. I am led to conclude that innovative art in Thailand and contemporary Thai rural culture have not yet been brought into a meaningful relationship. Whilst the main interest of contemporary art is the immediate experience of present-day living (Faust, 1991:20-21), the notion of a vital, present-day rural life is still overshadowed by the traditional image of a static past seen in Thai classical art and the Western convention of the picturesque landscape. As a result, rurality has never become a fashionable topic for contemporary Thai practitioners (Pongdam, 2002)<sup>12</sup>.

Therefore this research project seeks to address that very issue. It seems to me that the dynamic of modern rural life is not compatible with any of the Western approaches that have been absorbed into Thai artistic practices since the inauguration of the Silpakorn University.

<sup>12</sup> My unpublished interview with Prayat Pongdam in April 2002.

In response, my research has aimed to find a practice that links contemporary Thai rurality with innovative art practice. To achieve this I have, like other Thai modernizers, sought out Western prototypes. My research found that British environmental artists such as Richard Long and David Nash have successfully combined current art ideas with rural locations. Unlike the Thai assumptions about rurality (either as “Thai logo” or no-go area for progressive practices), environmental artists in Britain have found ways of responding to the present-day rural environment (Andrews, 1999).

Thus my doctoral project started with the hypothesis that there are forms of artistic experimentation that could be effectively used in a rural context in Thailand. With these experiments in mind, my practical activities and theoretical ruminations have prioritised the process of operating as a creative practitioner ‘on site’ in the regional environment in which I grew up. As my thesis will explain, this involved setting up an arts centre in my home village of Banpao (BRAC). To do this I had to acquire (and then develop) the appropriate practice-led skills and philosophical disposition that would match my desire to be an adventurous artist (in a Western-international sense) and facilitate rural-oriented creative practices (in a manner recognisable to a present-day Thai farming community).

Before proceeding further I should state that it is, of course, impossible to escape the omnipresence of the city in contemporary society, rural or otherwise. It is therefore important to define the scope of my research project within the widely shared enthusiasm for metropolitan life that leads us to celebrate great cities as the primary sites for ‘paradigm shifts in modern art’ (Blazwick, 2007: 7). It is more than probable that my artistic experiments at BRAC are inconceivable without the cultural influence of Bangkok. It is certainly true that the idea for my project originated there. As a result, one way of viewing my research is as a new Thai-specific version of the city-dweller’s longing for rural retreat. During my research I have come to realise that the motivation to abandon the metropolitan context of art production has been present in generation after generation of artist.

My initial literature review helped me to identify a time-honoured interest in relocating arts practices to rural situations. A yearning for rural simplicity seems

to be a major driving force for artists (Marsh, 1982; Lerner, 1972; Lübbren, 2001; Mullins, 1985). Within Western art history, this is particularly true in the nineteenth century when modernisation caused huge population shifts in many parts of Europe. Nina Lübbren (2001) has published research on rural artists' colonies across Europe in the decades between 1870 -1910. She observes that vast numbers of city bound artists travelled to non-urban places in search of a pre-industrial way of life. It is clear that Lübbren believes that these artists found rural places imbued with nostalgia. The images they made of rural life suggest that modernisation never happened: they are the 'daydreams of society' (2001:13 -14).

In England, the transformation of the countryside, firstly, under the impact of the land enclosures between 1750-1815 (Bermingham, 1986: 10) and then, following industrialisation in the second half of the nineteenth (which drew people into the cities) prompted an increase in nostalgia for lost rural life styles. In earlier historical periods the English countryside had little popular appeal: pastoralism, despite its status as a poetic concept, was often regarded as dull. However, with country life apparently disappearing forever, pastoral attitudes were promoted with intensity (Marsh, 1982). The evidence of this newfound passion can be seen in the works of important British landscape painters, such as Thomas Gainsborough, John Constable, and J.M.W. Turner.

Bermingham (1986) remarks that:

The emergence of rustic landscape painting as a major genre in England at the end of the eighteenth century coincided with the accelerated enclosure of the English countryside (p.1) [...] the English saw their landscape as a cultural and aesthetic object. This coincidence of a social transformation of the countryside with the rise of a cultural-aesthetic ideal of the countryside repeats a familiar pattern of actual loss and imaginative recovery. Precisely when the countryside—or at least large portions of it—was becoming unrecognizable, and dramatically marked by historical change, it was offered as the image of the homely, the stable, the historical (p.9).

Some aspects of the Thai attitude towards the countryside can be cross-referenced to British history. Modernization in Thailand has made Bangkok the centre of industry, education and politics. Before the twentieth century Thai society was less centralized. Each community outside Bangkok was a sustainable entity, where agriculture was 'a social safety net' in terms of food

security (Jitsanguan, 2001). Even though the majority of Thai communities are still agricultural-based, the growth of an urban economy has drawn large numbers of the population to Bangkok. This displacement of communities within highly-pressured city contexts has generated a great deal of nostalgia for rural life. Many art practitioners have created works that are openly nostalgic. Painting the simplicity of rural life and singing songs that depict the beauty of the countryside serves as an antidote to city stress.

The leading Thai artists I interviewed (see Chapter 2) for my research (Tinnakorn Kasornsuwan, Jintana Piamsiri, Prasong Luemuang, Teerawat Kanama, Prayad Pongdam, Damrong Wong - Uparaj, and Pratueng Emjarern) confirm that the strongest desire for rural origins occurs when they want to escape the chaotic aspects of city life.<sup>13</sup>

Like my interviewees, I also experienced a nostalgic yearning for rural life when I had a studio in Bangkok. Even though I was brought up in near-poverty I consider my childhood in the countryside as the most magical period of my life. These city feelings of nostalgia involved an intense longing for a time free of worry. I recall a marvellously self-sufficient family life in which nobody noticed the lack of money because we had everything we needed on our farm. At that time electricity, gas and mains water had not reached Banpao and the concept of paying bills for the basic resources of life did not seem to exist. Villagers made the candles they used when it became dark and gathered the wood for fires during the cold season.

It is significant that my departure for the big city, and the loss of this way of life, was in good part caused by my ambition to be an artist and by the accompanying need for higher education. By the time I became a PhD student, I was very aware of the passionate nostalgia that motivated my interest in rural art. As a result, it was inevitable that my research would have to find a place for these feelings and, as the reader will find out, my method of enquiry evolved to take account of my nostalgia-driven responses to place and time. In my project nostalgia has functioned as an investigatory tool.

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<sup>13</sup> For a good description of this view in Western art, see for example Hemingway (1992).

In doing this, I hope to persuade the artistic community in Thailand that nostalgia furthers artistic experimentation and extends creative innovation. The body of practical work submitted for examination alongside this thesis proves, I believe, that my methods avoid the much criticised mixture of sentimentality and commercialism described by Phillips (1992: 18-19). The desired outcome for any fine art research project is that other artists will pick up the idea and use it to their own advantage. It is my hope that my use of nostalgia will make the current tensions between city and village, urban and rural, past and future an opportunity for a genuinely innovative engagement with rural-based art.

Of course, generally speaking, nostalgia has a 'bad press'. For many Western art historians a sentimental attachment to the past is linked to escapism and a sense of alienation from reality. According to Shaw and Chase (1989), a nostalgic retreat from the 'real' present by an artist entails a loss of creativity. Fraser Harrison (1991) sums up the situation as follows:

The accusation generally brought against nostalgia is that it knows no history, or rather that its approach to history is willfully and dishonestly selective. It falsifies by sugaring the past on which it feeds: the boring, painful and dishonorable parts are all ruthlessly forgotten, while the agreeable parts are grossly inflated, even imagined. Following from this is another charge, that nostalgia is at bottom defeatist and thus reactionary. Instead of fabricating dreams of a better future, its response to present evils is to surrender and seek compensation by fleeing to a fallacious past. (pp. 124-125)

However, my thesis will try to persuade the reader that nostalgia has a positive aspect. Nostalgic feelings are an active engagement with an unsatisfactory present. They help us search for newness and progress within 'unrealised possibilities, and unpredictable turns and crossroads' (Boym, 2001: xvi).

Svetlana Boym remarks

Nostalgia is not always about the past; it can be retrospective but also prospective. Fantasy of the past determined by needs of the present have a direct impact on realities of the future. Consideration of nostalgic longing makes us take responsibility for our nostalgic tales (Boym, 2001: xvi).

Harrison (1991) also makes a positive observation about the connection between past, present and future in nostalgia. He says:

Our addiction to fantasies about the past is certainly a symptom of our failure to achieve a healthy mode of life in the present, but these fantasies are not to be dismissed out of hand, for they have their subversive side too. They are, after all, invariably visions of a better way of life, not a worse one (p.129).

Arts practitioners have a long history of giving subversive form to nostalgic reminiscence. Later in my thesis I turn to the writing of Marcel Proust for a treatment of recollection, wistfulness, regret and sentimentality that subverted and then reshaped the modern European novel. No one would doubt the creative credentials of a writer like Proust and his example provided me with a platform for the development of my own concept of 'immediate nostalgia'. With this prospective category of nostalgia established I was able to move on to pursue a practice-led research method that allowed me to be attentive to present-moment concerns through the action of nostalgic reverie.

Whilst pursuing my practical experiments I have continually examined the scope of 'immediate nostalgia'. I cannot claim that this idea (and the arts practice in which it was cultivated) will contribute new insights in every society that exhibits an urban/rural divide. This much I have learnt through conversations with artists, critics and arts facilitators in the UK. Whilst it seems to me that the action of yearning for a lost time or place should not be automatically dismissed by any artist, it is the contingencies of the present situation in Thailand that have demanded a radical approach to the idea of nostalgic longing. This is the frame for which my doctoral project was designed and as 'immediate nostalgia' became the tool that inserted my cosmopolitan artistic identity within the regional agricultural context in which I grew up, I realised that my research was a progressive and, I hope, effective response to the issues and concerns outlined in this introduction to the contemporary art scene in Thailand.

## Chapter outline

In order to demonstrate how the outcome of my research has provided new practical models for nostalgia-driven art, it is important to understand the meaning and the role of nostalgia in work by other artists. Thus, Chapter 1 will begin with a literature review of the development of the term and how it became a significant factor in art about rural life in the West, particularly in Britain.

Chapter 2 will examine the social and cultural situation in modern Thailand. The first section of this chapter uses Banpao Village as a case study. The second part presents case studies of Thai artists whose creative practices have been stimulated by a yearning for a lost rural way of life. These case studies will be a basis for my explorations of the problems associated with art about rural life in Thailand.

Chapter 3 describes my artistic experiments in order to demonstrate how I arrived at my current approach to rural art. An important part of this development was the contrasting locations in which I began to define my idea of “immediate nostalgia”. To clarify this term I cross-reference my own experiences with Proustain reverie in Marcel Proust’s famous novel *Remembrance of Things Past* (Moncrieff and Kilmartin trans, 1983). I also explore models of cognitive and non-cognitive aesthetic appreciation found in the work of the environmental aesthetician Allen Carlson (2002b)<sup>14</sup>. Towards the end of this chapter, I focus my discussion on the final series of artworks I made in Banpao that reflects the ‘balance’ (a favourite term of Carlson’s) between my artistic practices and village life.

The final chapter reconsiders the aims of my research and briefly surveys the evolution of my objectives since the doctoral project was initiated in November 2000. In particular, I focus on the philosophy, the set of guiding principles, that has helped me realise the practical work described in Chapter 3 and inaugurate the arts centre detailed in the appendix to the thesis. This involves a discussion of John Dewey’s distinction between ‘artworks’ and ‘art objects’. I apply this

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<sup>14</sup> See also Carlson (1978, 1985, 2002a, and 2003)

interesting concept to a short history of rural work as it appears at different stages in the development of Western rural art. In doing this I am able to define the artistic approach to ruralism that is missing in contemporary Thai art. I conclude the thesis by speculating on the future role that BRAC could play in redressing this problem.



## Chapter 1

### Nostalgia and art about rural life

#### Introduction

In this chapter I intend to provide a theoretical and historical account of nostalgia: how the term has generally evolved and then found applications in the discourse that seeks to explain the rupture of town and country in modern society.

#### The development of the concept 'nostalgia'

The term 'nostalgia', coined in the late seventeenth century by physicians trying to classify the extreme melancholy experienced by Swiss mercenaries fighting in the service of foreign kings throughout Europe, is derived from the Greek word *nostos*, a return home, and *algos*, a painful condition (Behlmer, 2000: 7). The cultural and social critic, David Lowenthal, notes that the word had originally referred to a disease with physical symptoms: 'A physician found the lungs of nostalgia victims tightly adhered to the pleura of the thorax, the tissue of the lobe thickened and purulent' (Lowenthal, in Shaw, and Chase, eds, 1989:1).

Over time, the meaning of nostalgia has broadened to categorise an entirely psychological and a much less precise set of feelings that mix an idealisation of the past with a rejection of the present (Behlmer, 2000:7). The New Oxford English Dictionary defines the term as 'a sentimental longing or wishful affection for the past, typically for a period or place with happy personal associations' (p.1266).

Fraser Harrison (1991) observes that:

in practice *nostalgia* has virtually shed its first meaning. For example one would not say of the child unhappily languishing at board school that he was suffering from nostalgia. Indeed, the word is nowadays used almost entirely in a derogatory sense to describe a sickly attitude to the past, a perversion of historical or biographical truth for the sake of cheap or 'unearned' feelings.

However the feeling of nostalgia is a paradoxical emotion. It combines grief with consolation. 'Just as memories of home make the homesick melancholy but comfort them too, so memories of a personal or historical past can both sadden and cheer at once' (Harrison, 1991: 125).

Shaw and Chase (1989) believe that our present use of the word is metaphorical. The home we miss is not a geographical place but rather a state of mind.

Harrison (1991) says:

The peculiar process of nostalgia, whereby grief over what has been lost is inseparably mixed with pleasure at remembering it, is in effect a gesture of self-love, or at least of self-acceptance. Furthermore, some measure of healthy nostalgia for childhood, youth and the lost world that made us is a necessary precondition of our ability to fantasize about an unprecedented future. Nostalgia and idealism are the balanced parts of a continuum. At its most fruitful, this re-acceptance of the past encourages the process by which experience of life and self are converted into art. To cut oneself off from childhood, to close down memory, is to be excluded from an extremely fertile stimulus. It is a form of self-mutilation, which ensures only a distorted and diminished use of one's creative powers (p.123).

Lowenthal (in Shaw and Chase, eds. 1989) describes how the most creative and intellectually gifted Victorians expressed nostalgic regrets for pre-industrial rustic calm. They saw in the medieval age a shared and ordered spirituality lacking in their own tawdry, secular, and over-individualistic times. In a similar fashion, modernists in the twentieth century ascribed to tribal societies the virtues of timeless "primitive"<sup>1</sup> traditions. In the present day, environmentalists praise the pre-industrial world as a non-exploitative model of ecological harmony. In all these examples, earlier times are used as an antidote to a contemporary state of degradation (p.21). Raymond Williams says, it is like 'using the past, 'the good old days', as a stick to beat the present' (1973:12).

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<sup>1</sup> In their essay 'Primitive' Antliff and Leighton (in Nelson, R.S. and Shiff, R. eds, 1992) say that the term "primitive" does not constitute an essential category but exemplifies a relationship of contrast or binary opposition to "civilisation". 'Within the context of modernism, "primitivism" is an act on the part of artists and writers seeking to celebrate features of the art and culture of people deemed "primitive" and to appropriate their supposed simplicity and authenticity to the project of transforming Western art.' The concept of primitive should be thought of as 'the product of the historical experience of the West and more specifically as an ideological construct of colonial conquest and exploitation.'

Shaw and Chase (1989) suggest that for nostalgia to develop, certain conditions have to be met. The first condition is a view of time that is emphatically linear. One needs a passing historical sequence in order to have a place or event to revisit. Nostalgia is unlikely to be a part of a culture that has vivid present without a strong sense of temporal progress (Shaw and Chase, 1989: 2-3). The second condition is a sense of the present as deficient. For example, when a society loses faith in its ability to change it will retreat into “retro” styles (Shaw and Chase, 1989:3).

The third condition is a ready supply of historical objects and images. Nostalgia is often constructed around timeworn things which, once given talismanic status, and link people to the past. This process often gives trivial and unimportant bric-a-brac a paradoxical cultural significance (Shaw and Chase 1989: 4).

Lowenthal (in Shaw and Chase, eds. 1989: 22) describes the ‘uses and abuses’ of nostalgia. Firstly, there is the process of commercialisation in which objects from the past become so popular that their seemingly sacred values are turned into commodities and ‘precious memories’ are deprived of their sanctity. Secondly, there is the perversion of nostalgia by the media, with its attendant sense of unreality. For example:

Reiterated replays of yesteryear’s popular classics excite opprobrium as a failure of nerve, a loss of creative drive, a disengagement from contemporary issues. [...] Nostalgic obsession in the popular arts not only means alienation from present-day reality but also implies accepting such detachment as normal and appropriate (Lowenthal in Shaw and Chase, eds. 1989: 22).

Thirdly, there is nostalgia’s reactionary bent, a glossing over of the past’s iniquities and indignities. As a result:

Nostalgia is linked to an elitist, escapist perspective designed by the wealthy and powerful to justify their control of the present, to palliate its inequities, and to persuade the public that traditional privileges deserve self-denying support (Lowenthal in Shaw and Chase, eds. 1989:25).

Lowenthal also defines nostalgia as a desire to get out of modernity without leaving it. The nostalgist seeks the condition of *having been*, with a sense of integration and completeness lacking in all ‘present’ (in Shaw and Chase, eds.

1989: 29). The American social theorist and art critic, Lucy R. Lippard (1997) has a similar view. She says that nostalgia is a process of 'cultivating responses'. She quotes Kevin Lynch (*What Time is This Place?*, 1972) who observed that 'the preservation of a certain kind of past channels us into a certain kind of future'. The idea is that we use old things to enhance the present (Lippard, 1997:85-90).

Given the above debate, it is reasonable to assume that artists chose to look back to the past in order to reinforce their creative practice in the present. For example, one of the world's most innovative artists in the twentieth-century, Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944), used the fairytales (told to him by his grandmother during his childhood) to develop a pioneering approach to abstract art. The renowned English art critic, Herbert Read (1988) notes the profound impression made on Kandinsky by Russian medieval icons and folk art (p.166). Many of his revolutionary canvases are filled with colourful images of architecture, people and horses painted in mystical, fairytale-like mood (Krausse, 1995:91). [Illustration 1]

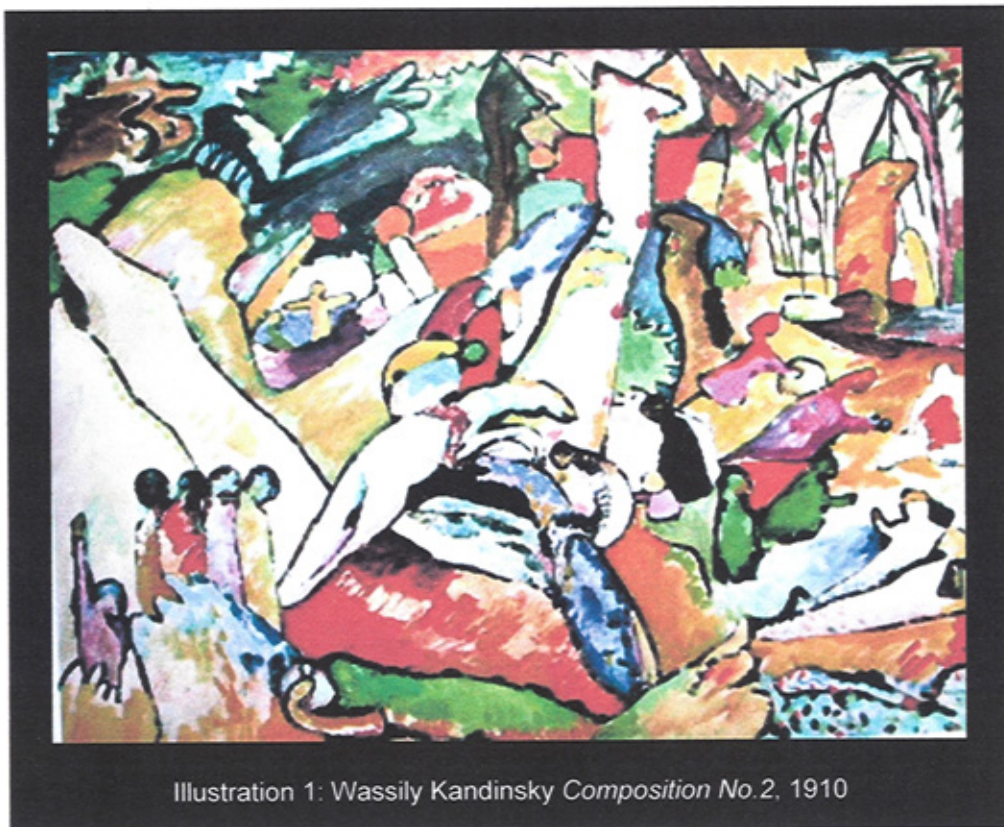


Illustration 1: Wassily Kandinsky *Composition No. 2*, 1910

In a preface to Kandinsky's 'Concerning the Spiritual in Art', Richard Stratton comments that the success of Kandinsky's paintings involves the combination of a 'primitiveness and directness attributable to his Russian heritage' (Kandinsky, 1977: vi)<sup>2</sup>. Kandinsky's later work, particularly following the formation of the Blue Rider group and the publication of *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* (Concerning the Spiritual in Art), both events taking place in 1911, shows his desire to creatively counter-balance his anxieties in a period of extreme social and political crisis: revolution in Russia (from 1905), the First World War (1914-1918) and uprisings in Germany and other of European states during 1918-19 (Krause, 1995:86). Given the terminology used by Kandinsky at this time, it seems clear that he sought from art a healing, spiritual harmony. He talks about art improving and refining the human soul and its spirituality (Kandinsky, 1977: 54-55).

It is not unusual to hear innovative modernist artists talk in these terms. For example at a symposium held at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1951 the Dutch-American painter, Willem De Kooning:

described an art of 'spiritual harmony' in terms which suggested that he saw its protagonists as in [a] process of flight from the painful realities of life: their own *sentiment of form* [...] was one of comfort. The beauty of comfort. The great curve of a bridge was beautiful because people could go across the river in comfort. To compose in curves like that, and angles, and make works of art with them could only make people happy. (Cited in Stangos, 1985:200)

With De Kooning and Kandinsky we have two modernist 'masters' linking experimental and radical fine art practices to a creative escape from present day ills. Threaded through the discussion in this chapter is the thought that nostalgia, in the hands of a creative practitioner, can operate as an effective agent of change. I feel impelled to start defining this characteristic as 'therapeutic nostalgia'. In doing this I am recognising (as an artist) that a sense of loss or separation from home offers what Harrison (1991:123) calls 'a pleasure at remembering'. This pleasure can be made to do more than help an individual escape from present-day pain (this would limit the concept to a rather

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<sup>2</sup> The original German edition of 'Concerning the Spiritual in Art' (*Über das Geistige in der Kunst*) was published in 1911.

conventional notion of therapy<sup>3</sup>), it can generate alternative realities and possible futures. The nostalgia-induced pleasure I have in mind tries to model a satisfactory world where, at present, everything is unsatisfactory.

In the next section of this chapter I will apply the term therapeutic nostalgia to the history of rural art in Britain. My hope is that the sense of regression, cliché, and escapism so often levelled against pastoral art will find, here and there, more positive dimensions.

## **Nostalgia and British Art**

From this point, I wish to explore therapeutic nostalgia as a creative force in Western art history. I am interested in the idea that landscape artists created images of idyllic countryside as a reaction to the growing industrialization of Europe.

The cultural historian Jan Marsh (1982) observes that in nineteenth century Britain, when a large proportion of the population was drawn off the countryside to work in the city, the motif of a pastoral Arcadia<sup>4</sup> became a common concern for artists and pastoral poets.

In his book 'The Use of Nostalgia', Laurence Lerner (1972) sees pastoral as a literary expression of nostalgia, and the longing for Arcadia as a version of the adult's longing for childhood. 'The beauty of home is seen through the eyes of loss' (1972:41). Lerner remarked:

There is no lack of nostalgic poetry in the nineteenth century – no lack of longing for a simpler, happier condition, for the freshness of the early world, for escape from the great city [...]. Such escape is normally from town to country (pp. 44-45).

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<sup>3</sup> I do not want to confuse my interest in art and nostalgia with art therapy. Art therapy, as the drama therapist Ann Cattanach (1999) explains, allows patients to explore personal issues and experiences through the medium of art. There is no attempt to produce the levels of creative achievement and cultural value I associate with artworks that exhibit therapeutic nostalgia.

<sup>4</sup> Arcadia is actually a region of Greece but in pastoral poetry it represents a place 'where shepherd-poets sang songs of love in shady groves, far from the commerce and politics of the city.' [See the catalogue of a National Gallery Touring Exhibition, "Paradise" 2003, written by Sheena Stoddard and Alexander Sturgis].



The compositional devices by which British artists represented the desire for rural escape originated in the sixteenth and seventeenth century paintings of Italian artists such as Titian and Giorgione and, most notably, in the classical landscapes of the Frenchman, Claude Lorrain (Stoddard and Sturgis, 2003: 6).

[Claude Lorrain was] a landscape specialist who raised the genre from a low standing in the academic hierarchy to a major means of artistic expression. Rooted in the landscape tradition of the [other] northerners established in Rome, the brothers [Paul] Bril [1554-1626] and [Adam] Elsheimer [1578-1610], he succeeded in giving pictorial form to the nostalgia for a lost Golden Age articulated by the Roman poet Virgil [...] His poetic classicism, founded on a masterly control of subtle gradations of all-enveloping light and harmonious geometric structure, become the lens through which successive generations of artists and art lovers view his preferred subjects, the landscape of the Roman Campagna and the Bay of Naples.

(Langmuir and Lynton, 2000:146-147)

Claude's pastoral landscapes render Arcadia 'with a golden light that suffuses the distance and gilds both the foreground figures and the forms of the natural settings, as in his *Landscape with Rustic Dance* [1640-41]' (Andrews1999: 97).

[Illustration 2]



Illustration 2: Claude Lorrain, *Landscape with Rustic Dance*, 1640-41

Claude's influence can be seen in British landscape paintings which picture scenes of rustic life with peasants represented as charming folk happily engaged in agricultural toil. Perhaps the most celebrated example is John Constable's *The Cornfield* (1826) [Illustration 3]. Here we see an iconic English landscape framed by trees on the left and right sides of a composition that foregrounds a boy drinking from a pond, his sheep dog and his flock of sheep. It is interesting that this vision of high summer was painted during the winter months in Constable's London studio. According to his son, *The Cornfield* recalled the path that Constable took to school when he was a child (cited in Stoddard and Sturgis, 2003:11). Thus, the painting could be said to be a city-based exploration of nostalgia for place (summer in the countryside) and time (a journey back to a lost childhood). This is, for me, therapeutic nostalgia at work.



Illustration 3: John Constable, *The Cornfield*, 1826



However, Constable's distinctive approach added creative and progressive dimensions to his reminiscing. His intensive out-of-doors studies, which resulted in luminous, sketch-like canvases, made him a forerunner of the Barbizon School and the Impressionists (Langmuir and Lynton, 2000: 156). Constable's methods are of undoubted historical importance: his rendering of his home landscape, its changing patterns of light and atmosphere, have a cultural value that continues to ignite the popular imagination to this day.

His *Cloudscapes* series (1821-1822) are clearly the result of close observations of atmospheric phenomena [illustration 4]. Constable wrote that 'painting is a science...it should be carried on like research into natural laws' (Schultze, 1970: 63).

He insisted that the landscape artist must walk through the fields in humbleness and that it was never granted to an arrogant man to see nature in all her beauty. This candid and simple view of art was developed by Constable into a new principle: whenever he sat down in the presence of nature in order to make a sketch, then first and foremost he must endeavour to forget that he had ever seen a painting (Schultze, 1970: 63).

In Constable's preference for first-hand engagements with the actuality of the natural environment we have one of the roots of nineteenth century realism. This can be seen as part of a growing interest in hard facts, in representations of reality.



Illustration 4: John Constable, *Cloudscapes study*, 1821-1822

In contrast to the above description of 'charming folk happily engaged in agricultural toil', we now have a strain of rural imagery that attempts to show the hardship of country life. For example, John Brett's *The Stonebreaker* (1857-8) [Illustration 5] depicts the laborious activities of a young boy on the North Downs just south of London. The picture appears to contrast the natural freedom of the boy's puppy (seen nearby playing with a hat) with the slave-like work that prevents the country boy from rejoicing in the idyllic landscape that surrounds him.

However, the historian John Barrell (1980) argues that the pleasure that nineteenth century artists took in representing rural hardship resulted in only 'half an image'. The attempt to describe rural reality was 'softened down' by the picturesque Arcadia that was always retained within the concept of rural art. In an exhibition catalogue 'Painters and Peasants' (2000), Adrian Jenkins observes that:

Brett's *The Stonebreaker* focused only on what was beautiful in nature. Since society preferred the realities of poverty to be kept discreetly hidden, like the majority of artists, Brett avoided depicting the insanitary aspects of working-class life. For artists this made economic sense since images that could be considered brutal or ugly were difficult to sell. As a result, paintings that suggested real poverty continued to be in the minority when compared to the conventional sentimental pictures that were typically viewed on the walls of the Royal Academy (2000:20).





Jenkins and Barrell complain that whilst rural subject matter can include representations of labour, and can be extremely factual about the natural environment, Victorian artists and their audiences were only after new versions of the Arcadian landscape. The historians have in mind art movements such as the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (Brett was an associate of this group which included Holman Hunt and Dante Gabriel Rossetti). The Pre-Raphaelites followed the ideas of the influential art critic John Ruskin who insisted that artists, designers and architects '...should go to nature...' <sup>5</sup>

If one feels that the fruits of Ruskin's thinking (i.e. Victorian gothic architecture, William Morris' medievalism, etc.) (Naylor, 2004) cover over and disguise the hard social facts of nineteenth century country life, then one is likely to also think that Ruskin-inspired art evokes (despite his forward-looking support for the early socialist movement) 'a mood of nostalgia...' (Staley and Newall, 2002: 173). The Pre-Raphaelites painted England as though the industrial revolution had never taken place. They sought innovation through the lens of the past. However they were innovative artists, they explored topical moral issues and responded to the scientific developments of the day. Their earnestness and interest in modern science led them to achieve a new way of painting that evoked a past world of visual brilliance (Marsh, 1996).

An example of this aspect of the Pre-Raphaelite landscape can be seen in William Holman Hunt's *Our English Coasts 1852 (Strayed Sheep)*, 1852 [Illustration 6]. Hunt painted the scene (of Sussex cliffs) with a meticulous observation of light and natural phenomena.

In creating such a mimetic representation Hunt adopted a plateau landscape format combined with dazzling prismatic colour. Instead of exploiting the sun as a vehicle that discovers form, the colours that convey light are daringly juxtaposed so as to intensify the clarity of every surface (Staley and Newall, 2002:34-35).

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<sup>5</sup> In his lecture in Edinburgh, November 1853, Ruskin praised the Pre-Raphaelites in following his doctrine: 'Pre-Raphaelitism has but one principle, that of absolute, uncompromising truth in all that it does, obtained by working everything, down to the most minute detail, from nature, and from nature only. Every Pre-Raphaelite landscape background is painted to the last touch, in the open air, from the thing itself' (Cited in Staley and Newall, 2002:26).

Ruskin praised the picture for its 'absolutely faithful balances of colour and shade' in sunshine and shadow (Marsh, 1996:7).



Illustration 6: William Holman Hunt, *Our English Coasts 1852 (Strayed Sheep)*, 1852

Mullins (1985) believes that the mood of nostalgia found its most profound form in the Pre-Raphaelites' landscape art. He observes that, after the end of the Pre-Raphaelites, art about nostalgia became second-rate: 'the primary figures in modern landscape painting have invariably looked for other things (pp.140-157).

W.J.T. Mitchell (1994) argues that 'eighteenth and nineteenth century landscape conventions are now part of the repertory of kitsch, endlessly reproduced in amateur painting, postcards and so on' (p.20). However, Mullins also points out that the culture of nostalgia caused by the Industrial Revolution has not just faded away. It has become an integral part of the fabric of modern life. Nostalgia may no longer be expressed through an Arcadian painting; it spills out as an even bigger statement through the invention of the green city and the suburban nature reserve. The scheme of countryside and farming community conservation, including National Trust properties and safari parks all show a



nostalgic reflection of the pre-industrial world. Mullins talks about this phenomena using John Milton's title: "Paradise Regained". '[T]he ethic of Paradise Regained is that anything which suggests pre-industrial life, and anything to do with the countryside, means quality' (pp.140-157).

Marsh (1982) says that the twentieth century impulse for returning to nature 'was not backwardly nostalgic but forward-looking — not to repudiate the city and to return to a pre-industrial way of life, but to build a new society incorporating all the features of the good life' (p.220).

For some, going back to the land meant more than just living there, it meant a deeper sense of returning to cultivation, to agrarian life and a closer, intimate relation with the earth. And this led to individuals and groups motivated by the same desire as that which impelled similar young people in the 1960s and '70s to leave London for hill farms and rural communes — seeking out smallholdings and plots of land, where they endeavored to grow their own food and live out the Simple Life. Characteristically idealist, they saw their experiments as models for the future, when the whole population would abandon the competitive, commercial world of the city and join the pioneers in a new life of peaceful co-operation and personal harmony. (Marsh 1982:93)

It was this "back to nature" impulse that stimulated like-minded artists to form a group called *The Brotherhood of Ruralists* and leave London for the English West Country in 1975<sup>6</sup>. The name echoes the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. This group was led by the British Pop-Artist, Peter Blake, whose idea at that time was not only to abandon city life but to also reject the tide of Modernist art. In the late 1960s and the early 1970s, Blake complained, art was about numbers, concepts, documents, machines, photographs, maps, mud, and piles of bricks (Martin, 1991: 7-9). Like Blake's Victorian heroes (the Pre-Raphaelites rejected the academic tradition of their time), the Ruralists worked against fashionable art, which they thought was there only 'to shock and show its political credentials — not to be beautiful, not to give pleasure or reassurance' (Martin, 1991: 7-9). The result was that the Ruralists left the city in order to resurrect the traditional values and skills of art.

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<sup>6</sup> The founding members of the group were Peter Blake, Graham and Annie Ovenden, Graham and Ann Arnold, David Inshaw and Jann Haworth. Some members of the group have now gone separate ways. They keep reuniting and exhibiting under the name *The Brotherhood of Ruralists*. Their most recent exhibition was in July 2005 at Leister Gallery, London. The gallery also included works of the Ruralists' heroes: Burne-Jones, Rossetti, Madox Brown, Holman Hunt, Millais, and Ruskin.

Graham Ovenden, a co-founder of the group, defined the Ruralists project as a self-conscious effort to 'pare away our base metropolitan values, seeking, if you will, rock and earth as opposed to concrete' (cited in Rosenblum, et al. 1988:52). They made it clear that the rural environment is:

a potent source of inspiration and imagery that they as artists should not ignore. It is for the Ruralists not simply a question of observing nature closely with an objective eye but bringing its range to their experience and subjective perceptions of poetry, literature, music, history and myth.' (Usherwood, 1981: 52)

Their work, which is done in a style of high precision reminiscent of the Pre-Raphaelites<sup>7</sup>, covers the full range of nostalgic rural imagery. Peter Blake's paintings of faeries [Illustration 7] may be a good example of how the Ruralists have been 'deeply absorbed in the mythical and fantastic elements of 'being in the country' (Usherwood, 1981: 61).



Illustration 7: "Puck, Peaseblossom, Cobweb, Moth and Mustardseed"

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<sup>7</sup> In his review of the *Exposition Universelle* of 1855 in Paris, William Michael Rossetti remarked that the Pre-Raphaelites may be seen as the "apostle of Realism" in Britain, a position analogous to that of a French artist, Gustave Courbet. However, the realist position of the English school can be, according to Rossetti, distinguished in the following way: 'whilst French and other schools were concerned with naturalism, only the English realised the effect through its minute details. [...] closely observed natural detail was a cornerstone of Pre-Raphaelite practice' (cited in Staley and Newall, 2004: 25).



[Peter Blake] has shown greatest curiosity about its folklore and history, and the interweaving of all these aspects with certain literary and poetic traditions. This and the fascination he had long had with the child fantasy world, inhabited by the great Victorian and Edwardian children's writers and illustrators and the 'fairies painters', soon found vivid personal confirmation in the revelations and imaginative world inhabited by all children, and by his own in particular. (Usherwood, 1988: 61)

Clearly, the evocation of sentimental and nostalgic feelings was seen by Blake and the Brotherhood as a tactical tool in their campaign against progressive contemporary art. The negative connotations of nostalgia simply served to reinforce their mission to give the past a place in the present.

As Graham Arnold, comments: 'You can only be affected by the past because you are living in the present...it is very much the spirit of being alive at this particular moment' (cited in Usherwood, 1981: 51).

At this point I feel that the negative and positive connotations of nostalgia have been established. Furthermore, the relevance of this debate to the concept of rural art has also been demonstrated. In the next chapter I will explore the relationship between rural art and therapeutic nostalgia as it occurs in the context of rural and metropolitan Thailand.

## CHAPTER 2

### Rural Communities and Nostalgia-Driven Art: a Case Study





## Introduction

The following chapter will examine the recent transformation of rural society in Thailand and the impact of immigration to Bangkok on the creative imagination of Thai artists. The first section will outline the character of Banpao village and its cultural and agricultural history. The second section will describe the village's response to the growing domination of urban values and life-styles in Thailand. I will then move on to study a range of arts practitioners who, in one way or another, represent a nostalgic reaction to the erosion of the Thai rural identity. My aim is to demonstrate the current status of nostalgia amongst Thai artists.

In preparation for the research that supports this chapter I read a number of publications (and gathered information from websites) about life in Thai villages similar to my home village of Banpao. Examples include books such as 'Monsoon Country' by Sudhum (1993) and 'In search for the Far East' by the foreign travel writer Richard Walker (1992). More specific to my project, 'E-San Mural Painting' by Samosorn (1989) and 'The Soul of Isan Woodcarving' by Punjabhan and Na Nakhonphanom (1993) offered a fund of local knowledge about the northeastern (known as Esaan<sup>1</sup>) region of Thailand in which Banpao is situated.

In addition, this chapter draws upon my own photographs of Banpao taken over the past fifteen years. This is the period that, according to Baker and Phongpaichit (2005), marks a decisive decline in the economic, cultural, social and political stability traditionally provided by the rural backbone of the nation. Because I am a fine art researcher (and not an anthropologist) these photographs should not be seen only as objective evidence. Although I do use them to represent the recent history of my village, these images were (and remain) an attempt to 'essay' Banpao life through an ongoing photo-montage of repetitious day-to-day customs and seasonal activities. I use photography as a form of sketchbook.

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<sup>1</sup> The English spelling of this word can be different in different books, for example, Isarn, Esan, Esarn, or E-san. However, they all mean northeastern region of Thailand.

In contrast, my attempt at uncovering rural nostalgia amongst Bangkok artists involved the more conventional research method of the studio interview. In doing this I tried to represent the views that were expressed to me as clearly as possible. Unlike the British artists I studied, the practitioners who are the subject of the last section of this chapter have not been written about in any published form in the framework of "rural art". For this reason, the interviewing process yielded information that was both new and thought provoking. There are only a few books on Thai contemporary art (e.g. 'Modern Art in Thailand' by Apinan Poshyananda (1992) and 'The Integrative Art of Modern Thailand' by Herbert Phillips (1992)) and none of these capture the degree to which artists working in Bangkok project their rural origins onto the modern-day city environment. Having established the readiness with which Thai artists utilise therapeutic nostalgia I use the conclusion of this chapter to speculate about an alternative use of nostalgic yearning that I call 'immediate nostalgia'.

## **Banpao Village**

Banpao is situated in the Kasetbun District, Chaiyaphum Province. The first settlement of Banpao community is believed to have been during the Ayudhya period (1350-1767), (Religion Department of Thai Government, 1982)<sup>2</sup>. Two important characteristics must immediately be discussed: Banpao is agricultural and Buddhist. Most accounts of the history of Thailand stress the centrality of a way of rural life that has developed in relation to the practice of Theravada Buddhism<sup>3</sup>.

In a Thai village, Buddhism combines the requirement of liberating the mind from human delusion with the necessity of living in harmony with nature. In the same way that the agricultural environment is seen to be the product of generations of labour, it is also clear that a single life span is not enough time to achieve true

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<sup>2</sup> The age of the village has been estimated using archaeological evidence from the village's main temple.

<sup>3</sup> As Buddhism expanded across Asia from its origins in India, it evolved into two main forms: Theravada and Mahayana. Theravada is the original form of Buddhism. (Robinson, B.A. "Buddhism" <http://www.religioustolerance.org/buddhism.htm> [access 10 May 2005]). See also, Gillett, R.(2001) *The Essence of Buddhism*. London: Caxton Publishing Group



liberation. The Buddhist concept of reincarnation has a strong environmental resonance for villagers. It is easy for a Thai farmer to understand that he must strive to achieve 'merit' (in Thai, called *Boon*) in the present in order to contribute to a shared, accumulating 'good'. Agricultural people can relate to the idea of environmental and spiritual inheritance in the same terms.

The next section will illustrate and describe the village ceremonies that have evolved over centuries in support of the agricultural/spiritual well-being of the community. These are continued even though the traditional way of life is changing. In the context of this thesis, the retention of ritual within an increasingly non-traditional social context could be seen as an example of therapeutic nostalgia provoked by an increasingly uncertain national identity.



Illustration 1:

*Food offering* is the most common activity by which villagers achieve Boon. Every morning they give food to the monks who walk through the village with a specially designed bowl (*batra*).





Illustration 2:

*Songkran festival* is an event that marks the beginning of Thai New Year. It starts on April 13th and lasts for three days. It was originally for people to pay respect to their elders and ask for blessings. In the modern era people treat it as entertainment. The highlight of the festival is a colourful parade, which each small community around the village organises. In the festival people pour water over each other. As April is the hottest and driest time of the year, this water is seen as a blessing.



Illustration 3: Wisakabucha and Kaopansa





Illustration 4: *Kaopansa* candles

In the beginning of the rice farming season, in May, the villagers attend the temple to celebrate *Wisakabucha Day*, an event that recalls the birth, enlightenment and death of the Buddha. This is followed by the rite of *Kaopansa*. According to Buddhist traditions, during *Kaopansa* the monks must remain in the temple for three months. When there was no electricity in the village, the monks used candles when studying and meditating at night. Thus on *Kaopansa* day the villagers made candles to donate to the temple. They continue this tradition until today.



Illustration 5: *Boon Pa-ved*

The ceremony of *Boon Pa-ved* gives the villagers an opportunity to paint Buddhist images on cotton banner. This banner is called *Pa Pa-ved* (Pa-ved cloth). Like the wax candles *Pa Pa-ved* is paraded to the temple. The monks use it to decorate the temple and to remind themselves to follow the Buddha to Nirvana.



Illustration 6: *Thod-ga-tin*

*Thod-ga-tin* is a Buddhist ceremony that takes place when the monks finish their three months retreat in the Rainy season (around October). In the morning the villagers pray in the temple. In the afternoon they offer a yellow cloth to the monks and listen to a Dharma talk by the principle monk.



Illustration 7:

*Loi Kratong* is an enjoyable ceremony held at the full moon of the twelfth lunar month (around November). The villagers celebrate *Loi Kratong*, by making boats with banana leaves in a lotus shape (called *Kratong*). People place coins and candles in the *Kratong*. They believe the *Kratong* will carry away their sins for the New Year. When night falls, the *Kratongs* are launched onto the main lake in the village, transforming the water into a fairy-tale world of lights. It is a fitting way for the villagers to give thanks to the power of water and to celebrate another cycle on the wheel of fortune. (Davies (no date): 105)



## Disruptions

There are two recent transformations to the agricultural aspects of Banpao life that need to be discussed before proceeding further: 1) the introduction of 'iron buffalo' tractors to replace the animals that drew ploughs and carts and 2) the influx of Chinese middlemen who buy and sell rice and offer loans to farmers to help them mechanise their work (Walker, 1992: 77).



Illustration 8: Traditional farming



Illustration 9: Iron buffalo

In both cases, industrial mechanisation and the practices of the competitive market economy have altered, probably irrevocably, the sustainable system that has developed in villages like Banpao since prehistoric times. According to Samosorn (1989) the northeast of Thailand has sustained an independent economy for over 2,500 years. There is archaeological evidence of rice and bronze tools that contradicts the theory that rice farming was inaugurated in South East Asia following contact with the civilisations of India and China (Samosorn, 1989: 250).





Illustration 10: Banpao's pastoral scenes

When I recall Banpao before the advent of tractors and rice merchants I do not find it difficult to link the way of life to the most ancient traditions. The families amongst whom I grew up farmed only enough land to provide for their needs.

Apart from rice they grew fruit and vegetables, which were shared out within their extended family and amongst neighbours. Pigs, ducks and chicken were kept for



meat. In addition, fish were readily available in local ponds and flooded paddy fields.



Illustration 11: Fish drying

There is a well-known verse that describes the wealth of food resources in rural Thailand: 'Nai Nam Mee Pla Nai Na Me Kaow' (In the river, there is fish, in the field, there is rice). Banpao farmers never lacked food. The richness of natural resources has been one of the main characteristics of Banpao village. Rice and fish are not only the most common meal for farmers, they have become a symbol of 'food' itself.



This can be noticed from the villagers' friendly greetings when they walk pass each other: "Have you had rice yet?" or "What do you have with your rice today?" The spontaneous answer is "I have rice with fish"; no matter what they had for a meal that day.

My photographic archive documents fish and chillies being dried in the sun. In this way seasonal food was preserved and made available throughout the year. It seems very probable that such methods date back to prehistory.

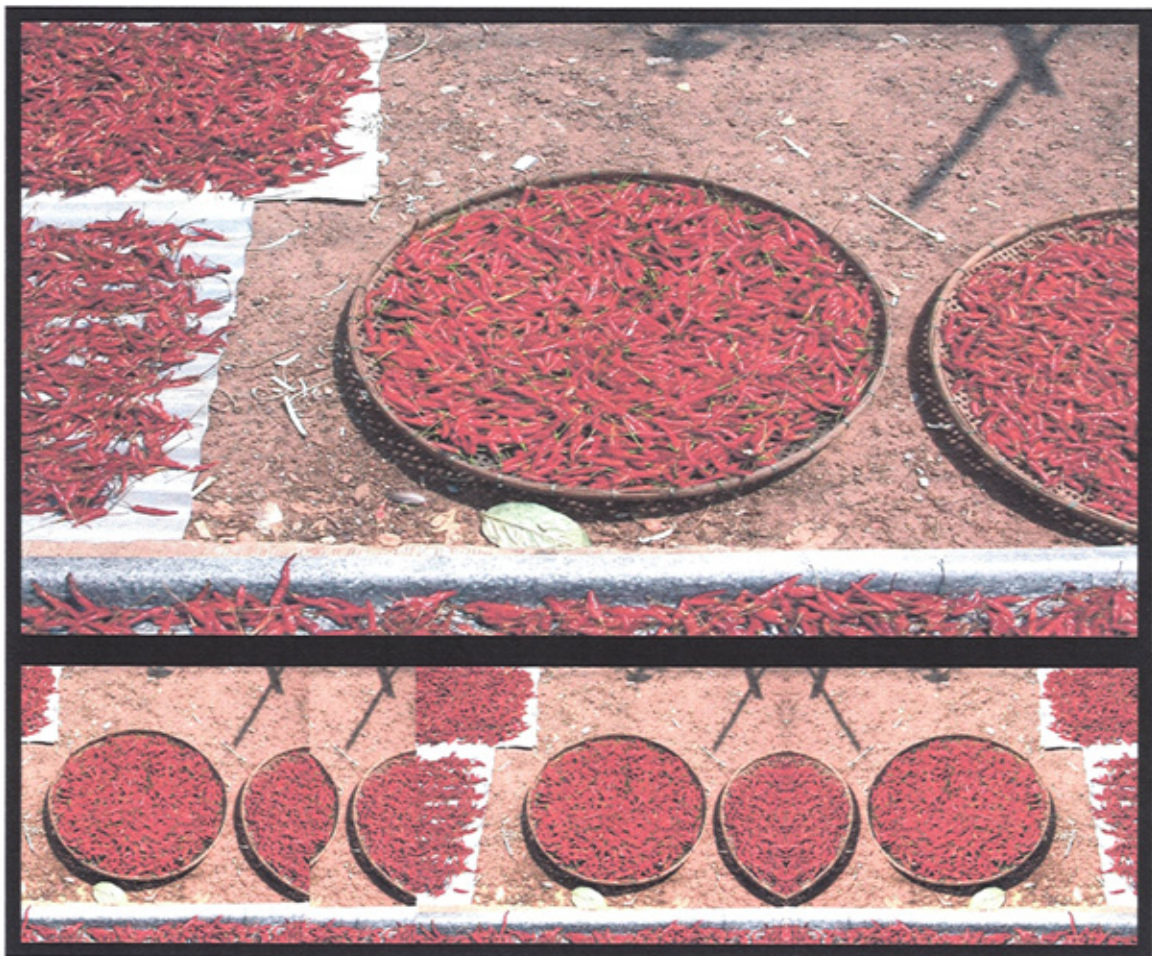


Illustration 12: Chilli drying

In recent years the government has encouraged farmers to increase rice production. There have been nationwide missions to encourage the adoption of modern technology and chemical fertilisers and countless local schemes to improve irrigation systems. As a result, Thailand has become one of the biggest exporters of



rice in the world and, whilst remaining a land of farmers (about sixty per cent of a population of sixty-three million (Poonyarat, 2003: 8A)), has transformed a traditional way of life into a very competitive agricultural industry focussed on international markets.



Illustration 13: The use of machineries in farming



Illustration 14: Royal Ploughing Ceremony

With this change of status, the religious and cultural importance of rice has also undergone modification. The festivals that blessed each stage of the rice-growing process were once an entirely local matter, a common sight in villages across the land. Now there is an all encompassing Royal Ploughing Ceremony that is televised

nationwide to mark the beginning of the rice-growing season. Just as the ancient balance between productivity and conservation was once marked by countless small ceremonies that celebrated the spiritual strength of each village community: now the commercial production of rice generates this lavish TV spectacle that is said to promote the spiritual strength of the entire population (Chadchaidee, 1994).

This correlation of village and national identity has some resonance in my later discussion of rural themes in contemporary Thai painting. For example, the many farming rituals that offer thanks to Mae Posop (the Rice Mother) have been popularised in tourist-oriented imagery that apparently represents Thailand both to itself and to the outside world. As we shall see, Bangkok artists (nearly always with rural upbringings) have been in good part responsible for this transformation.



Illustration 15: Traditional village life



## Migrations

Despite economic growth, Banpao farmers remain poor. In 2000 the annual income per head in the Chaiyaphum region was equivalent to £400. In some Thai regions the income can be even lower. Chaiyaphum currently ranks sixtieth out of the seventy-five provinces. This has led, not surprisingly, to an increase in migration to big towns and foreign countries. Villagers relocate in search of higher pay and more secure sources of income. In particular, the young leave to look for work in the building sites and factories of Bangkok. Many of them work as taxi drivers and vendors selling fruits or ice-cream. If they can, they return to the region and resettle in the village with their families.



Illustration 16: Village migrants in Bangkok



Above all else, it is the impact of returning migrant workers that has changed the fabric of village life. Those who have lived and worked in cities import urban values to the midst of farming communities. Rural families now expect to own television sets and stereo equipment and use electronic public address systems within traditional ceremonies (Walker, 1992: 77). Alongside this trend, the government has also sought to update rural society through initiatives that have encouraged the spread of digital telecommunication technology throughout rural areas.



Illustration 17: The use of technology in traditional ceremonies

This is an important point that I will return to later in my discussion of rural themes amongst Bangkok artists. It is clear from my own fieldwork that these artists have failed to register the rapid evolution of Thai rural life. They want only to depict village life as a pre-technological paradise.

The subject of rural migration to Bangkok has been studied by Walker (1992). One of his themes relates to my interest in nostalgia. Within the culture of temporary



relocation described above, rural migrants usually end up with the lowest status jobs and, as a result, are disliked by the people of Bangkok (Walker, 1992: 77-78). Because city dwelling holds no glamour for the rural exile, the yearning to return to village life can be extreme.

As a result, there is a collective mood of nostalgia within the Isaan community in Bangkok that is made manifest in modern urbanised versions of regional folksongs. Traditional village music (known as 'Mo-Lam') has, as the migratory culture expanded, developed a city offspring called 'Loog-Toong' which means 'sons of the countryside' (Samosorn, 1989: 302). Here we have a vibrant form of popular music (perhaps now one of the most distinctive and successful branches of the Thai music industry) that is openly sentimental about a lost rural idyll in northeastern Thailand. Loog-Toong songs describe the hardships of city life and the terrible longing for rural life that exile creates.



Illustration 18: Mo-Lam

It is worth noting that whilst the migration of farm workers has generated a vital and populist application of therapeutic nostalgia, there is another version of creative homesickness that has arisen through the migratory pull of educational opportunities. Year after year a minority of young people have fought their way to study in Bangkok or, beyond Thailand, in major cities around the world. The impact of educational relocation is likely to be permanent rather temporary (you stay where there are career prospects) and, in the resulting state of perpetual dislocation, therapeutic nostalgia becomes a reflective tool within the literary and visual arts. For example, the writing of Pira Sudham and Paiwarin Khao-Ngam serves as a good introduction to the psychological terrain of the educational migrant. The

allegorical symbolism of these writers offers us a set of ruralist ideas in which urban sophistication continually fails to eclipse the primacy of a simple regional childhood. In *Monsoon Country* by Pira Sudham (1993) the son of a rice-farming family is catapulted from the poverty of village life into the complexity of urban living when he becomes a student, first in Bangkok, and then in London. The darkest aspects of therapeutic nostalgia are explored in Sudham's account of the pain of social progress. He builds an evocative association between social and cultural evolution, the future prospects of an unborn village child, and the growth of nostalgic reflection in the mind of the author. It is interesting that the progenitor of both urban distress and therapeutic nostalgia is seen here as a pregnant women.

In my mind I carry memories of childhood, of life in the villages, much as a pregnant woman carrying a child. Everyday these images grow, and I know that one day I shall have to give birth to them through the medium of writing. (DCO Thailand, 2005)

Paiwarin Khao-Ngam's poem *Banana Tree Horse*<sup>4</sup> also describes the thoughts of an educated man trapped in a city environment who longs for the straightforward tutelage of his father:

With chest scars and bleeding pain,  
I must flee this chaos infernal,  
And ride back o'er rice fields again  
To beg for blessing paternal.  
(3<sup>rd</sup> ed. 1999: 20 – 21)

The dark side of this poet's therapeutic nostalgia contrasts with the use of nostalgic ruralism by artists who have moved to Bangkok for educational and career purposes. Here nostalgia is part of a much less reflective, more assertive search for the "essential characteristics of modern Thai art" (Poshyananda, 1992: 84). There are successful artists in Bangkok, mostly painters, whose lives have followed the same pattern of permanent rural exile as the above literary examples but whose ruralism surfaces within a stylistic debate about Thai authenticity and the unquestioning adoption of Western techniques (Poshyananda, 1992: 84).

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<sup>4</sup> In 1995 *Banana Tree Horse* earned Paiwarin Khao-Ngam a S.E.A. Writing Award, which honours leading poets and writers in the ASEAN region (Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, The Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam). The awardees are selected by their own peers in each of the ten countries. This annual award was first given in 1979.



## Sample artists

In the examples that follow I discuss artists who have explored rural themes, rural processes and traditional materials in a reactive, anti-Western mode. Many are influential practitioners teaching at the Silpakorn University. The nature of their employment and their prestige within the Bangkok arts community is itself an indication of, and explanation for, their long-term dislocation from their rural origins. In turn, the success that holds them in a metropolitan context is also, it seems, the key to their therapeutic engagement with rural nostalgia.

What follows is a synopsis of a series of studio interviews made between 2001 and 2002. Two of my artist-samples (Prayat Pongdam and Damrong Wong-Uparaj) belong to the last generation of Silpakorn graduates taught by its founder Professor Feroci. With the exception of Pratuang Emjaroern (who is self-taught), the other artists (Tinnakorn Kasornsuwan, Jintana Piamsiri, Prasong Luemuang and Teerawat Kanama) are the product of Silpakorn in the years following Feroci's retirement when Prayat Pongdam and Damrong Wong-Uparaj, now holding important teaching posts, updated the institution established by their tutor.

Sample artist one:

**Prayat Pongdam**



Illustration 19: Interview with Prayat Pongdam

Prayat Pongdam is a professor of fine art at Silpakorn University, where he received his undergraduate degree in 1957, and was awarded a scholarship to continue his studies at Academy of Fine Arts in Rome (Accademia Di Belle Arti Di Roma), Italy, which he completed with a Diploma in 1962. Prayat is known as a devoted teacher as well as a renowned printmaker, specializing in the iconography of rural life (Pongdam, 1993 and 2000).

My interview notes reveal several aspects of Prayat's ruralism. He frequently describes the rural environment in which he grew up and clearly still thinks of himself as a countryman. His long-retained mental image of his home village seems to function as a generic source for new visual ideas. In this sense, Prayat uses both memory and imagination to negotiate rural nostalgia.



Illustration 20: *Morning*, 1981 [Woodcut]

*Morning*, 1981 is one of Prayat's most famous works. This woodcut won a gold medal in the 1981 National Art Exhibition. The image of a rooster crowing on a bamboo cage at dawn represents the most familiar iconic image of Thai village life



April 4<sup>th</sup> 2002

Interview at Prayat's home/studio in Bangkok. At the opening of the conversation he proudly announced that he is a country person. His father may have been a village teacher but he also kept cattle and maintained a farm outside his work at the school. The village (in Singburi) was surrounded by a vast and mountainous landscape and Prayat described his ability to visualise cowherds moving through early morning mists as they take their cattle out to pasture. He remembers other rural activities such as fire lighting and the general bustle of farm life with chickens, pigs and dogs running about the yard. He talks about these memories as an image of his home village that is imprinted on his mind. In this way it continues to be a source of inspiration for new work.

The central model for Prayat's ruralism is Paul Gauguin's flight from the restrictions of European society to the Polynesian 'paradise' of Tahiti. When Prayat saw Gauguin's Tahiti paintings he was immediately struck by their resemblance to his memories of rural Thailand. He saw the same tropical vegetation and simple clothing he recalled from his childhood.



Illustration 21: Paul Gauguin *Sacred Spring*, 1894

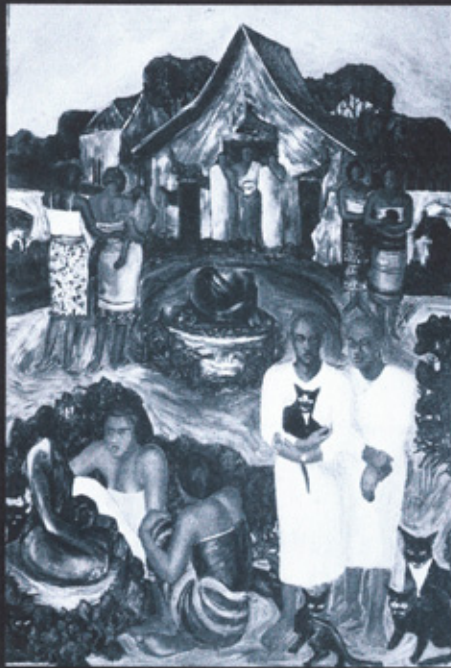


Illustration 22: *Nuns*, 1956

An example of Prayat's work that shows Gauguin's influence is *The Nuns*, 1956. Instead of depicting a Tahitian scene, Prayat painted ruined ancient temples. He wanted to pay homage to the simplicity and customs of traditional Thai life.

I feel that the influence of a Gauguin-type orientalism on Prayat is, in the context of this thesis, worthy of careful consideration. Prayat's colleague, Chalood Nimsmer, has described the role of artists such as Gauguin in providing an opportunity to rethink Thai identity.

[...] Gauguin's pursuit of a life untouched by the conventions of European civilization [although Gauguin knew that Tahiti was already spoiled by the French colony] opened the door for Thai artists to explore their own native persona, using subject matter and techniques that were clearly non-European (cited in Poshyananda, 1985:85).

This reads like an anticipation of post-colonialism: the Western desire for exotic experiences is appropriated and transformed by the very people it sought to construct as outlandish and 'other'.

Nevertheless, they did not envisage themselves as the 'Noble Savage' whose lives were free from modern artificiality. These Thai artists willingly accepted modern life but found inspiration in daily life and childhood experience (cited in Poshyananda, 1985:85).



The point seems to be that artists like Prayat used Gauguin's orientalist yearnings to construct their own 'exotic' rural childhood.

Sample artist two:

**Tinnakorn Kasornsuwan**



Illustration 23: Interview with Tinnakorn Kasornsuwan

The painter and printmaker Tinnakorn Kasornsuwan grew up in the northeast. He studied art at Silpakorn University and continued to work in Bangkok. His use of agricultural themes is often calm and peaceful, but also mixed with a strong sense of melancholy.

My interview notes record that Tinnakorn is interested in the concept of 'origin'. His ruralism is bound up with the need to express his understanding of the most basic way of life available to a contemporary Thai citizen. A quote from Tinnakorn in an exhibition catalogue (Kyoto, 2001) serves to make the point:

My artwork reflects the life of people in the countryside who live by farming and depend on nature. Their life style is simple and warm, which is characterised by their farming

tools and repeated working gestures and their struggle with the changeable weather conditions. (My own translation from Tinnakorn's Thai script)



It seems that an artist who evokes the peacefulness of the rural idyll as an original state is operating a different ruralist model from that of Prayat. Gauguin's orientalism, reinvented by Prayat as a search for a Thai native persona, defines the lost rural home through its colourfulness and outlandishness. These qualities are constructed in opposition to the characteristics of Western 'civilization'. Tinnakorn's model, on the other hand, is more philosophical and universalist. Here the lost rural home is only rediscovered in moments of quiet melancholia, a feeling that is probably general to all sentient beings. His abstracted compositions suggest an underlying (out of reach) state of stability: a point of origin that lies beyond change. In the catalogue, *Memory of the Village*, Wuttikorn Konga (2003) observes that Tinnakorn's paintings reflect the artist's dream of his home village, which is always beautiful and tranquil. The use of the word 'always' has, when applied to Tinnakorn's ideas, metaphysical implications.



Sample artist three

**Jintana Piamsiri**



Illustration 25: At Jintana Piamsiri's studio

Jintana Piamsiri is another artist who is originally from a north-eastern rural community and a former student of Prayat at Silpakorn University. Like Tinnakorn, Jintana continued to work in Bangkok after graduating in 1993 with a master's degree specialising in Thai traditional painting.

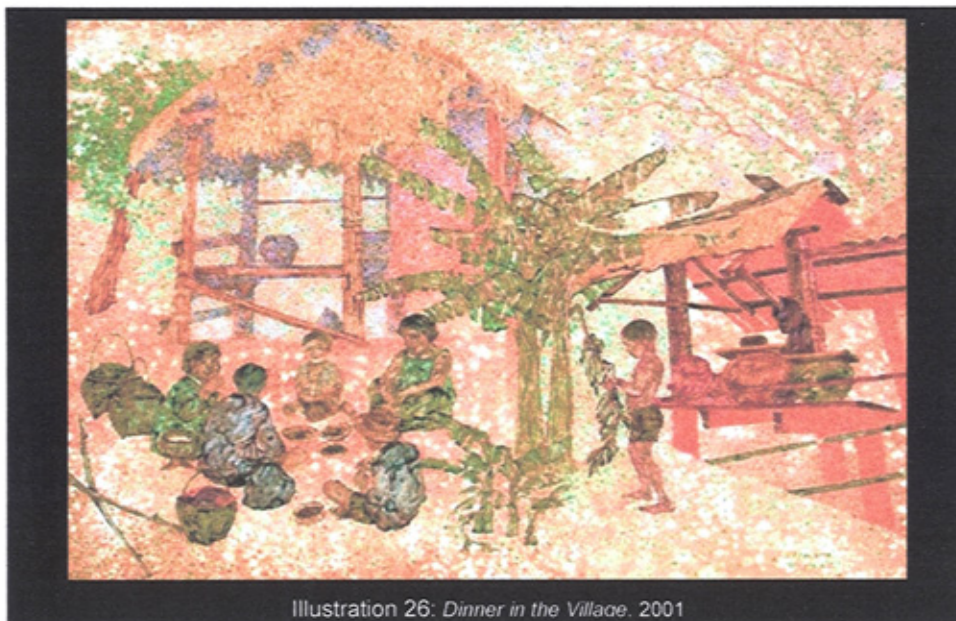


Illustration 26: *Dinner in the Village*, 2001

In Jintana's paintings there is no trace of the social and technological changes that have disrupted the continuity of rural living, and yet she regularly returns to her home village in the northeast to take photographs of daily life. Back in her Bangkok studio she makes selective use of these images and my interview notes describe how Jintana edits out the presence of televisions and cars in order to arrive at an image of Thai rurality that is untouched by technological progress. This wilful censoring of modern life is part of an artistic approach that celebrates the spiritual value of traditional craft skills. In fact, Jintana's paintings regularly reconstruct historical compositional processes such as 'parallel perspective' (Bhirasri, 1959b:13), which is used in Esaan traditional mural painting (called Hoop Tam in Esaan dialect). It is clear that Jintana wishes to emulate the integrity of artistic procedures that have evolved over centuries.



Illustration 27: Hop-Tam (Traditional Esaan Mural)

Esaan murals or "Hoop Tam" can be found in many village Sim (an Esaan word for temples), Viharn (the Thai name for the assembly hall of a Buddhist monastery), Ho Trai (temple library), and Ho Jak or Sala Karn-parien (teaching hall). According to Pirot Smosorn's (1989:265) survey there are 74 temples in Esaan that are decorated with mural paintings. The themes and painting techniques used in Esaan and central Thai murals are similar. Most of the paintings consist of depictions of Buddha's life and stories in Thai classical literature such as Ramakian (adapted from the Indian version of Ramayana). However murals in the northeast also include local folk stories such as Galagade, a tale of a hero who leaves his lover to fight a fierce demon.



May 15<sup>th</sup> 2001

Interview at Jintana's home/studio in Bangkok.  
Jintana described her enthusiasm for art from the Esaan region. The key concept here is sincerity. She believes that art from the northeast region, in contrast to that from the other parts of Thailand, has an unaffected character and this is the source of its distinctiveness.

Jintana's model of rurality seems to have been built on the values of the British Arts and Crafts movement (Harries, 2005). For instance, she sees industrial mass-production and the objective of profit as 'insincere'. In saying this she is surely using an ethical framework first promoted by John Ruskin (and the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood) (see Stalay and Newall, 2004, Marsh, 1996, and Naylor (ed.), 2004). The influence of the Arts and Crafts movement had spread across the world by the early twentieth century and it is not at all surprising to still find echoes of it in modern day Bangkok. Similarly, during the periods when my research was based in the UK, I also observed its continuing impact on British artists. For example, a visit to the studio of David Nash in North Wales was enough to confirm how the Arts and Crafts catchphrase of 'truth to materials' still maintains a hold over the contemporary imagination. In Nash's work you find highly abstracted minimalist sculptures whose powerful forms are the undisguised product of manual processes derived from the skills of the forester. Jintana's model of rurality emphasises localness and the authenticity of folk art in order to capture a lost equilibrium between human endeavour and the natural world. As with Ruskin, this state of natural harmony has, for Jintana, a spiritual and ethical dimension.

At this point I am going to pause to review the samples so far. My interviews have identified three subtle but nevertheless distinct approaches to the production of rural art within a close community of Bangkok artists and, as a result, I now have three ways of modelling the concept of therapeutic nostalgia and rural art in Thailand. These are:

- a) Rural art as a form of Gauguin-like escape from European values
- b) Rural art as a quest for personal origins
- c) Rural art as a continuation of the arts and crafts anti-industry credo

All three models are, as my interview notes confirm, a reaction to the urban dislocation and homesickness that I call therapeutic nostalgia. In fact, during the 1980s Jintana and Tinnakorn were members of a group of students at Silpakorn University that met regularly to converse in Esaan dialect and reminisce about their home villages. They thought of this activity both as a form of group therapy and as a stimulus to new ideas for paintings.

I now want to consider two other Bangkok artists (both members of the above group) who were serious enough about rural art to return to the northern provinces in which they grew up to establish studios. In this sense these two painters offer us a version of educational migration that is closer to the two-way process found amongst agricultural workers who, in their youth, move to cities looking for work and then return to settle down into family and village life.

Sample artist four:

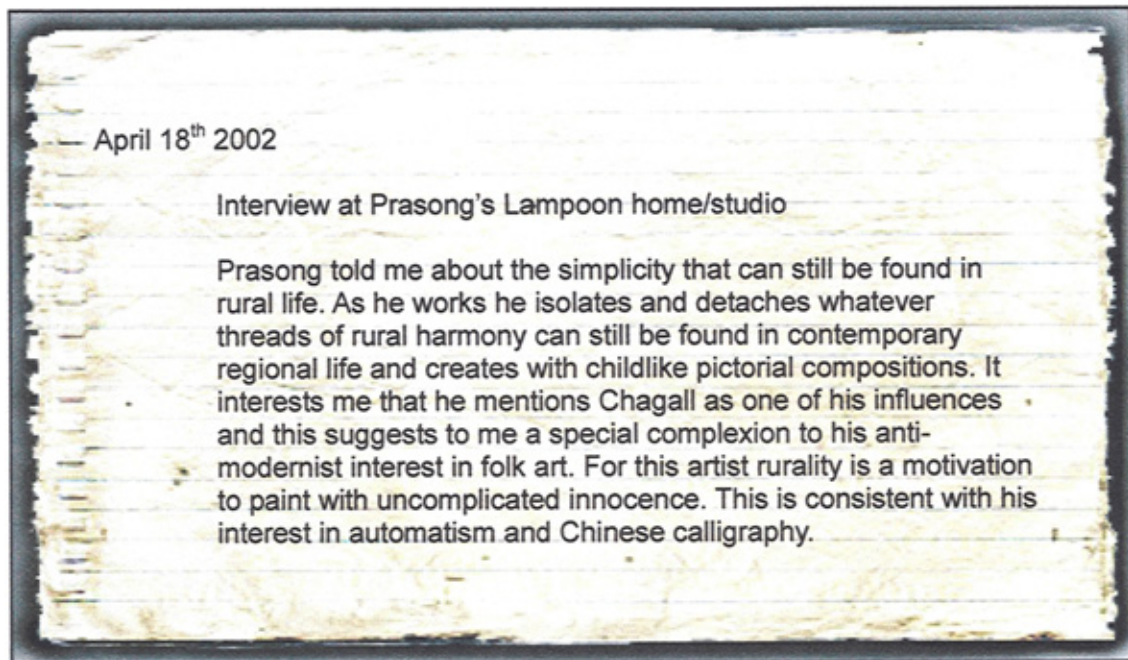
**Prasong Luemuang**



Illustration 28: Interview with Prasong Luemuang



Prasong Luemuang studied under Prayat Pongdam at Silpakorn University, where he formed the homesick-therapy group. After winning several awards in high profile national art competitions during 1987-88<sup>5</sup> Prasong left Silpakorn in his final year of studies to return to his home village of Lampoon (in the northern region of Lan Na<sup>6</sup>) to set up a studio.



Looking over my interview notes I see that Prasong describes a model of rurality that is very similar to sample three above (Jintana Peamsiri). This involves a refusal to engage with the changing Thai countryside even though he lives in a modern-day working village and claims, through an intimate knowledge of his surrounding environment, a greater level of observation of rural life. Like Jintana, the success of Prasong's practice seems to involve a link between pre-industrial agriculture and the integrity of the northern folk traditions. This would suggest an Arts and Crafts style response to an increasingly post-pastoral Thailand. However, the critic Poshyananda (1992) has noted that Prasong's art shows 'a synthesis of folk art, Lan Na art, calligraphy, automatism, and Western influences' (p. 205).

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<sup>5</sup> Including the Annual National Art Exhibition

<sup>6</sup> Lan Na is a Thai word for the Northern region of Thailand.



Illustration 29: *The Village*, 1991



Illustration 30: *In the Farm*, 1989

It is clear that Prasong's rural-based practice is a sophisticated utilisation of a range of non-native ideas made available to him during his studies at Silpakorn University. Poshyananda says that Prasong's 'eclecticism has dissolved the barrier between high art, illustration and graffiti' (p. 205) and so one can begin to discern a distinguishing feature that separates his model of rurality from that of Jintana in sample three. This time, rural themes function within a set of combinatory parts that together constitute an East/West visual arts synthesis. Therefore I think of Prasong's fusion of Thai rurality and Western influences as a fourth model.



Sample artist five:  
**Teerawat Kanama**



Illustration 31: Interview with Teerawat Kanama

Teerawat Kanama, another former Silpakorn student (and member of the therapy group) followed Prasong's foot steps to live in the village of Mahasarakarm in the northeast region. He has gained a reputation through winning awards in the Annual National exhibitions and other major art competitions in Bangkok.

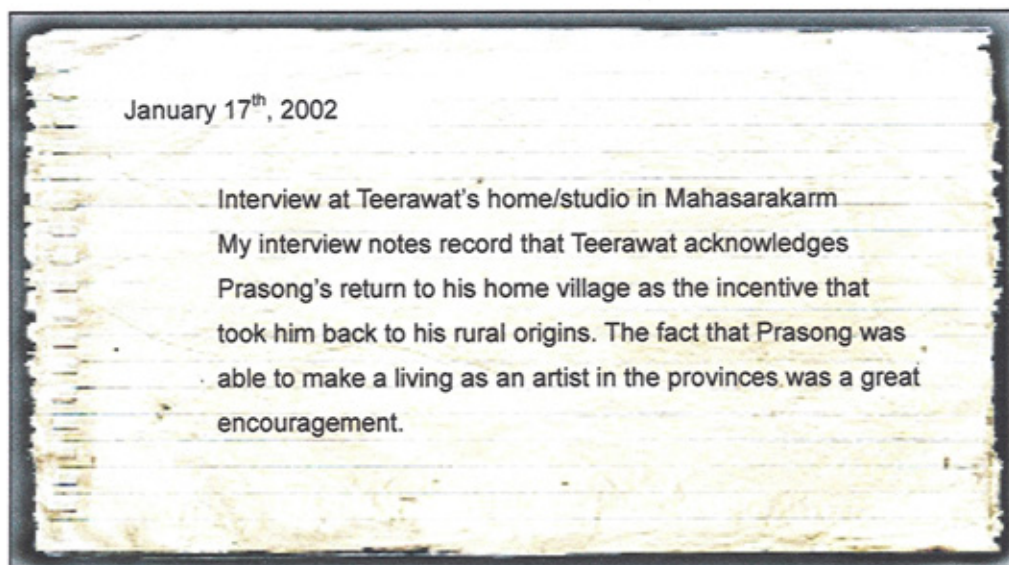




Illustration 32: The surroundings of Teerawat's studio

However, unlike Prasong, Teerawat's move to a village has not only turned him into a close observer of the disappearing poetry of rural life, he has also become a full participant in the routines of agricultural practice. On a daily basis he watches the local farmers at work from his studio window. At the busiest times of the agrarian year he stops painting to help with the rice harvest. His descriptions of his practice as an artist are full of references to the sense of belonging he feels within the rural community of Mahasarakarm. Teerawat says that a painting should express good feelings and it is not difficult to see his style as a celebratory commitment to what he calls the 'wholehearted' way of life he has found in this agricultural environment.



As with Jintana and Prasong, my interview with Terawat revealed a similar desire to clean up the contemporary rural scene and project a pastoral image that has been uncontaminated by industrial and technological 'improvements'. However, in conversation, he seemed more sensitive than either of the above artists to the mix of urban and rural life-styles that forms modern day village life.

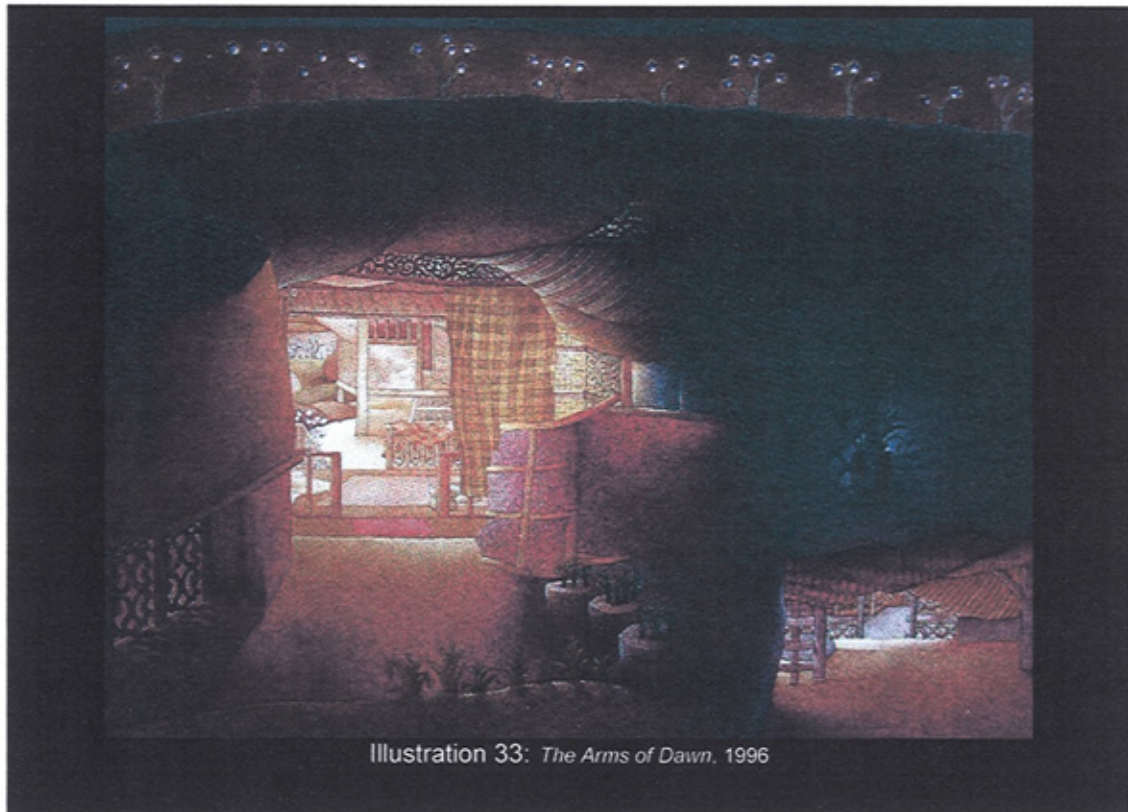


Illustration 33: *The Arms of Dawn*, 1996

Indeed there are signs of subtle, perhaps unconscious, accommodations of the presence of modern technology in some of his works. For example, in the above illustration, his atmospheric depiction of rural homeliness involves the stark chiaroscuro of two illuminated farmhouse interiors set within the surrounding gloom of the pre-dawn hours. If you are familiar with contemporary Asian villages it is possible to associate the rather unnatural light emanating from inside the houses with the glow of television sets. This soft tranquil interior light is, according to Teerawat, a symbol of the affectionate character of the Thai rural family and, given



my own counter-reading, perhaps the artist's immersion in village life has generated a more complex and nuanced vision than the rural stereotypes normally allow.

For the purposes of this study I am going to separate Teerawat's approach to rurality from Prasong's model of rural art practice in sample four. Here I wish to define a further model in which a strong sense of communal belonging is the prime motivation for making rural art.

As a result, in the sample offered in this chapter, I have been able to model five distinct ideas about rural art in Thailand. Given the socio-economic context outlined in my earlier description of Banpao, these models of artistic rurality have been discussed in relation to village-to-city migration. All of my interviewees could be called educational migrants. Three stayed in Bangkok after graduation and, as a result of nostalgic yearnings, created art works about lost rural origins. A further two returned to their home villages to set up studios in which they tried to distil images of pre-industrial harmony from the contemporary agricultural environment that surrounds them. In these cases one can see that close contact with the reality of a present-day village does not diminish the play of therapeutic nostalgia. Thus, so far, I can describe all the available models of rural arts practice in Thailand as concomitant with, perhaps even products of, the type of longing I call therapeutic nostalgia. This is so even when the practice is relocated outside the metropolitan context in the heart of the countryside.

As a result I will now add samples four and five to the previous set of nostalgia-driven models to form the following list:

- a) Rural art as a form of Gauguin-like escape from European values
- b) Rural art as a quest for personal origins
- c) Rural art as a continuation of the arts and crafts anti-industry credo
- d) Rural art as an ingredient within a synthesis of Eastern and Western approaches to child-like spontaneity
- e) Rural art as a method of celebrating communal belonging

During my interviews I came across two artists who included Buddhism as a personal and cultural force within their discussion of rural art. In the interviews that generated the above five models it was surprising that when spirituality and ethics were alluded to, or terms such as sincerity, simplicity, innocence and tranquillity used, it was not specifically Buddhist philosophy that was being referenced. My explanation is that Buddhism retains only an implicit value within the conceptual framework of contemporary Thai artists when their education has exposed them to a range of modifying Western and internationalist influences. As a result, it was interesting to meet two artists who went out of their way to describe the Buddhist principles at work in their art.

Sample artist six:

**Pratuang Emjaroern**

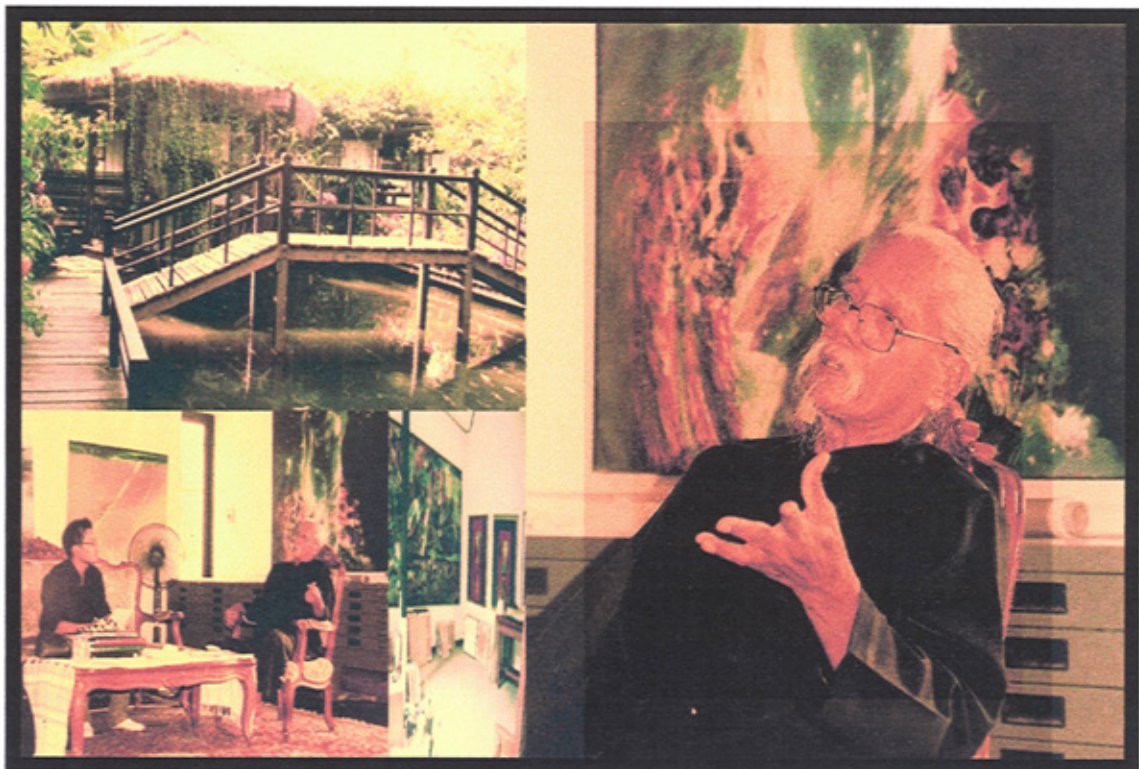


Illustration 34: Interview with Pratuang Emjaroern



Pratuang is one of a rare breed of successful self-taught artists. He had a hard life when he was very young caused by the death of his father. When he was ten years old, Pratuang was forced to leave formal education. He had to make a living for himself and his family. He took various jobs. He was at different times a construction labourer, farm worker and blacksmith. His artistic career started at the age of sixteen when he joined an advertising firm. He soon became one of the most successful movie poster painters in Thailand. In 1965, when Pratuang was thirty, he decided to become a full-time artist. It took him six years before he started earning a living from his art. During this time there was rarely sufficient money for his expanding family. Food was short, electricity was cut and illness was frequent. It seems likely that the experience of suffering led Pratuang to base his art on Buddhist philosophy. The following extract from Caroline Brazier describes the spiritual context in which Pratuang began to develop his approach to painting:

The Buddha's understanding of suffering grew out of his own experience. His encounter with the Four Sights <sup>7</sup> and the teaching of the Four Noble Truths <sup>8</sup> mark the beginning and end of a spiritual search. The teaching of the Four Noble Truths is the cornerstone of Buddhist understanding. It offers an analysis of the basic human process of responding to life's afflictions and the framework for understanding and working with the pain in our own lives and in the world (Brazier, 2003:26).

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<sup>7</sup> The Four Sights are the four significant events that made the Buddha realise the mortality of life and decide to search for the truth of life. These were a sick man, an old man, a corpse, and a holy man. (Brazier, 2003:8-17)

<sup>8</sup> The Four Noble Truths are Dukkha (suffering), Samddaya (the cause of suffering), Nirodha (the extinction of all suffering) and, Marga (The Eightfold Path that leads to the extinction of the suffering. (Brazier, 2003:26)





Illustration 35: Pratuang Emjaroern, *Fasting Buddha*, 1976

*Fasting Buddha*, 1976 is Pratuang's best known image in which an aura of spiritual light eclipses the head of the meditating Buddha whilst his body suffers earthly deprivations such as starvation. Although this work is not an example of Pratuang's interest in rurality, it does help us understand his interest in the dichotomous separation of the meditating mind from the mortal body and this opposition informs

his approach to rural art. For Pratuang, the actions of our bodies within the material world provide us with opportunities to rise above the limits of human experience. This is the reason Pratuang goes to rural locations to paint, seeking to immerse himself in worldly situations for the sake of their transcendent possibilities. During his interview Pratuang said: "if I want to create work about rice. I will study it by going to stay with a farmer for a year... Or if I want to paint lotus I will go to the pond every morning to observe it". As the matter of fact, when I arrived at Pratuang's studio for this interview, he had just returned home from the field where he was sketching a lotus.

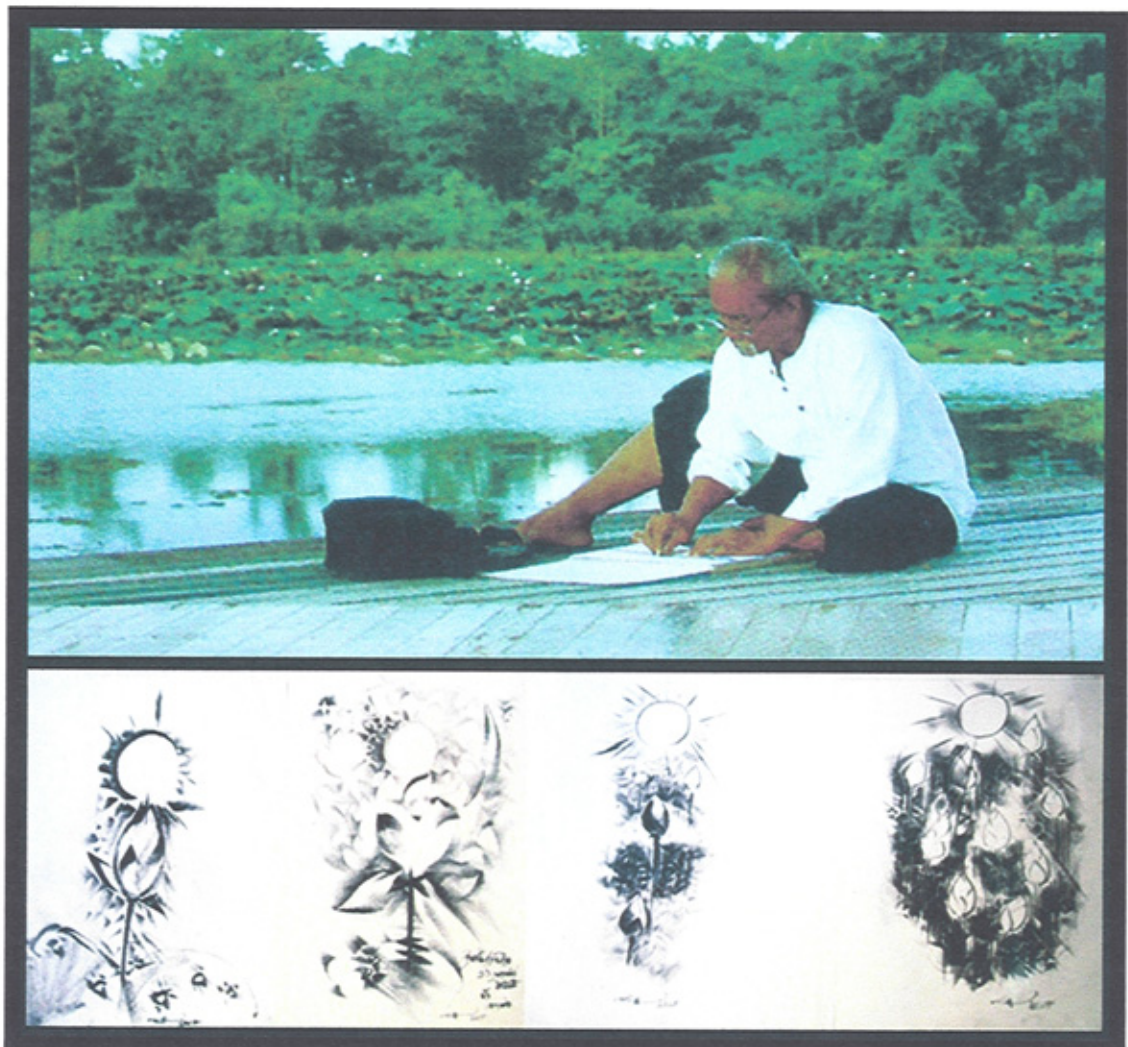


Illustration 36: Pratuang working at a lake





Illustration 37: Pratuang Emjaroern *Spiritual Essence in Lotus*, 1999

Thus Pratuang describes rural life as an opportunity to immerse oneself within a particular set of earthly coordinates for transcendent purposes. Furthermore, the creative achievements that might occur as a result of this immersive act were made to sound identical to the attainments of a meditating mind as it transcends the limitations of the mortal body.



Illustration 38:  
*Natural phenomenon*, 1988



Here we have a model of rural practice that leads the artist to engage with the realities of contemporary village life. Nothing in the models discussed above (a to e) specifies such an intense acceptance of the present-day rural environment. Although Pratuang's model aims at surpassing earthly reality, it does not seek to do this by ignoring the technological and industrial aspects of modern rural life.

Sample artist seven:

### **Damrong Wong-Uparaj**



Illustration 39: Interview with Damrong Wong-Uparaj

Damrong left his rural home in the Northern Province of Chiang Rai to study in Bangkok when he was a teenager. He entered Silpakorn University in 1957, where he studied under Professor Bhirasri. His training began at the moment when the influence of Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, and Cubism first effected Thai art students. After graduating from Silpakorn, Damrong furthered his studies in several Western art schools: the Slade School of Fine Arts in London (1962-1963), the University of Pennsylvania, and Columbia University in America (between 1968-

1970). Now a highly regarded artist, he was equally famous for establishing the Damrong Wong-Uparaj Arts Centre. He died in 2002 shortly after I interviewed him.

During this period, Damrong became concerned that his art was no more than a pastiche of Western styles. On his return to Bangkok, Damrong adopted and deployed the traditional tempera technique; a method of painting that he felt produced a sense of static calm which, in turn, helped him reassert the Theravada Buddhism at the heart of Thai culture.



Illustration 40: *House on the Mountain II*, 1994-1999



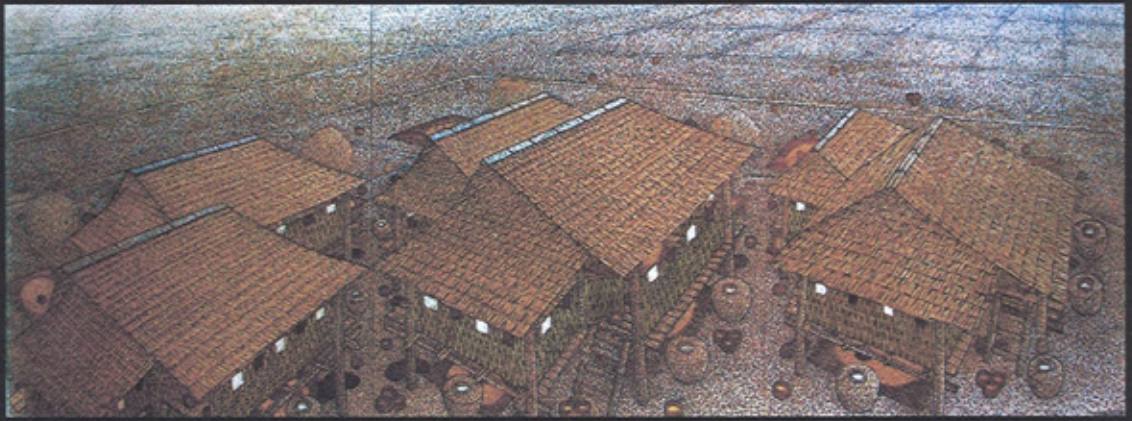


Illustration 41: *A Farmer's Village*. 1997

This interest in Buddhist calm took Damrong to the Bangkok suburbs where he found an environment that was, despite its proximity to the busy centre of the city, surprisingly empty of people and therefore still and tranquil. He painted many images of houses seen across a bridge that convey a sense of rural serenity. They usually have rural titles but are actually the product of suburban quietude. Commentators have noted that these paintings seem to invite the passer-by to cross into a peaceful world (Poshyananda, 1992:92). Here we have one of the basic ingredients of rural art: the idea that the city-dweller can restore his or her spirits by relocating outside the urban environment. Suburbs, in being situated on the doorstep of the big city, offered Damrong an approximation of rural escape.



Illustration 42: *Fishing Village*. 1961



Historians such as Tristram Hunt (2004) have noted the polarisation of suburb and city in the evolution of the idea of the city. In particular, Hunt mentions the enthusiasm of Victorian writers and artists for suburban developments such as the 'garden city' which were thought to achieve an interpenetration of town and country and fuse the advantages of both modes of life. Damrong seems to have taken this English idea and reframed it within the concept of the Buddhist retreat. His paintings depict a paradise at the margins of the Thai capital and, to the extent that his images attempt to re-educate the Thai identity, he seems to have created a model of rurality aimed at the growing urban populace of contemporary Thailand.



Illustration 43: *Farmer's Village*, 1997

Damrong's large-scale canvasses have an interesting technical aspect that seems to augment his 'suburban' model of rural arts practice. He added to the ancient method of tempera painting an unconventional drawing tool: the commonplace ball-point pen. As a result, the contemplative procedure of building up surfaces of tempera colour was 'overwritten' with expansive web-like textures that illustrate the

perspectival presence of buildings, gardens and passage-ways. Given the size of these paintings, Damrong's use of a fine-point biro reinforces the patient, calming routine of tempera painting with a deliberately humble and laborious graphic activity. Philips (1992) notes a link between Damrong's unusual combination of media and method and his approach to Buddhist meditation. With Damrong, neither art nor religion is allowed to lose sight of history or retreat from contemporaneity. Both involve a rigorous dedication to the legacies of the past and the trivial nature of the present. To the extent that, for Damrong, Buddhism and creativity incorporate and radicalize the concept of the rural retreat, I feel that this artist provides the most progressive model of rurality to emerge during my interviews with Bangkok artists.

The arts centre that Damrong set up in suburban Bangkok brings to fruition the philosophy of this important artist<sup>9</sup>. Damrong's progressive model of rurality, the synthesis of his village roots and the realities of contemporary metropolitan life, has led to the inauguration of an educational and cultural resource that helps modern-day Thais update their outmoded rural-based national identity. I was impressed by the way in which Damrong's approach combined creative and religious practices with the vehicle of a community arts centre. His complex of suburban studios and workshops offers artists (young and old) a creative learning environment that promotes the principles of rural retreat and Buddhist meditation in a manner that does not, as Poshyananda says, 'simply extol the rural and denigrate the city' (1992:92). During my interview with Damrong I was told that, given the philosophical and religious growth he had experienced through working in his suburban studio, he was not interested in returning to his home village. This was the first time that an interviewee had given a positive gloss to the symbiotic relationship between urban advantage and rural loss.

To conclude this chapter I will overview the art practices described in sample six and seven. In many ways both Pratuang and Damrong use the idea of rurality in a fashion that overlaps with the models of practice described in samples one to five (Prayat Pongdam, Tinnakorn Kasornsuwan, Jintana Piansiri, Prasong Luemuang,

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<sup>9</sup> See footnote 9 on page 8



Teerawat Kanama). For example, because they are both migrants from the provinces who stayed on in Bangkok to pursue professional careers, the dislocation of their rural origins clearly played the same role in their artistic development. Like the artists interviewed in the first five samples, Pratuang and Damrong rejected the uncritical use of Western styles in order to assert a stronger Thai identity in which the characteristics of rurality are the central component. However, their Buddhist principles have transformed these characteristics (sincerity, simplicity, innocence and tranquillity) into spiritual goals that can be achieved through an acceptance of a) present-day rural life (for Pratuang) and b) contemporary urban society (for Damrong). In contrast, my earlier interviewees ignored rural change (even though some of them now live in villages) and saw contemporary city life as an inauthentic environment for genuine Thai art (if they live in Bangkok it was because of educational and economic necessity).

In the next chapter I will describe the development of my own practice during this research project. The 'Buddhist' rurality of Pratuang and Damrong played a significant role in the evolution of my ideas. At the beginning of my research I was sure that the kind of practices that would contribute to my understanding of rural art were all creative responses to the despondency and yearning generated by Western-style city life. By the time I had concluded the interviews with artists reported in this chapter, the example of creative practice provided by an artist like Damrong made me rethink my attitude to the metropolitan context of contemporary art. To paraphrase Poshyananda (1992: 134), Damrong used the city as an opportunity to overcome modern-day chaos through simplicity, calmness and serenity. What now interested me was the recovery of equilibrium sought by both ruralists and Buddhists. In particular, I realised that the role of immediate reality in this process was not covered by my notion of therapeutic nostalgia. I now needed a different term. From this point I started to introduce a new concept: immediate nostalgia.



## Chapter 3

### **Practical Research: from my early work to my use of 'immediate nostalgia'**

#### **Introduction**

By working in two contrasting environments (an urban art school at Northumbria University and my rural art centre in Banpao village) I experienced different creative aspirations. The art school provided the ultimate experimental atmosphere with tutors and fellow students challenging every received procedure and approach. The idea was to be as open-ended and individualistic as possible. In contrast, in my home village I was surrounded by single-minded work that was aimed at the next harvest and the prosperity of the community.

When I embarked on my practical research in 2000 I believed that the knowledge I would gain through my experiments in Newcastle would automatically translate into meaningful art projects in Banpao. For example, through Northumbria University, I was put in contact with progressively-minded artists such as David Nash and Louise K. Wilson, who had a great deal of experience of operating in the most rural districts of Great Britain. These practitioners provided advice and critical debate that fed into my studio activities and, as this chapter will describe, my practical research began to shift from emblematic representations of Thai rurality to a reflective investigation of the state of mind that produces rural art.

My aim, as stated in the Initial Project Plan I submitted soon after PhD registration, was to convert the British 'know-how' about rural art to the Thai context. On the occasions I returned to Banpao to develop my rural arts centre I was able to test and evaluate the fruits of my Northumbria experiments in the target setting envisaged in my research proposal. This chapter reports on the rewarding interaction I experienced between the two locations in which I undertook this

research. As such it complements the growth of my theoretical ideas about rural art that resulted from my literature review and my interviews with artists in the UK and in Thailand (the topics of Chapters One and Two).

However, before describing the practical work undertaken during the research project, I must provide some information on the circumstances in which the idea for this research project first emerged.

### **The brief background to my art practice**

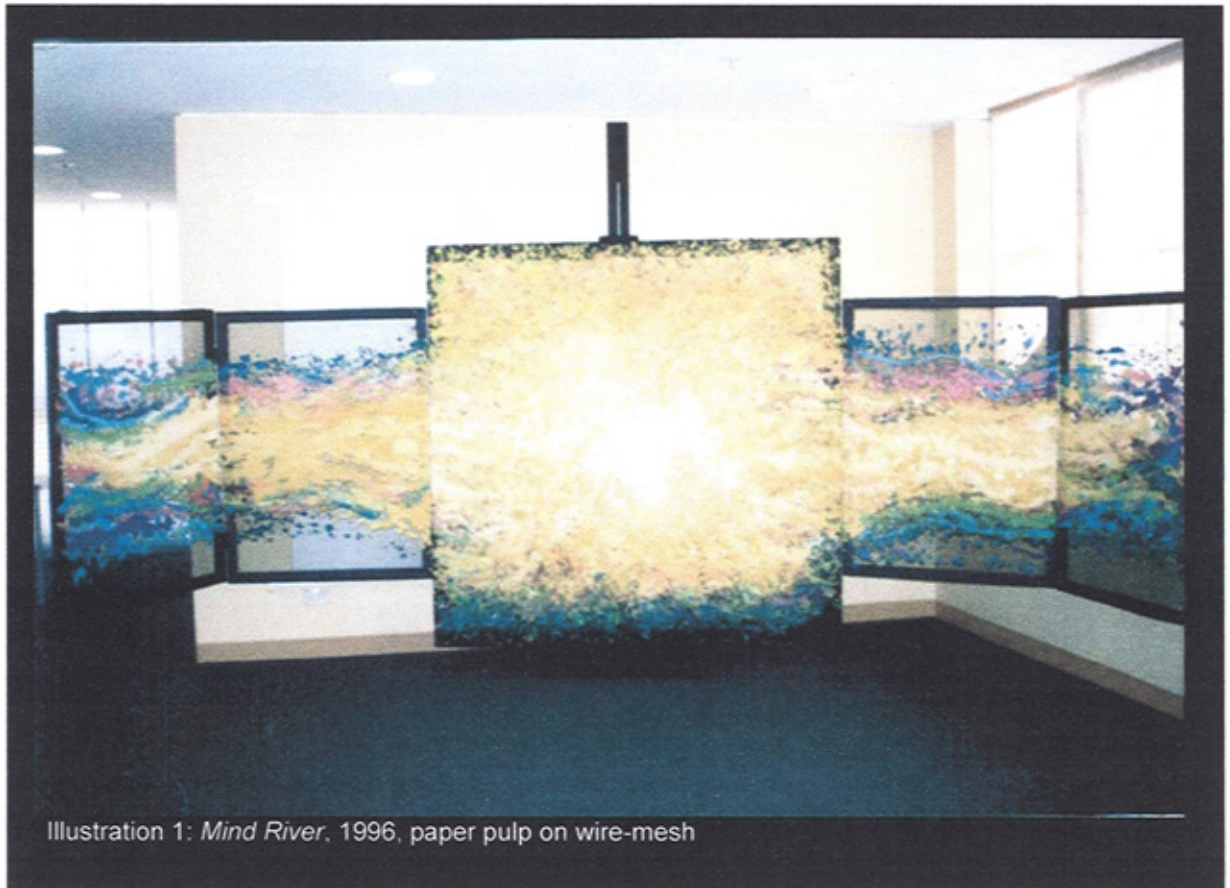
My practice has, at important stages in my development, been pursued within a state of exile caused by educational migration. Since I took up painting seriously at the age of thirteen, I have travelled to different places to study and work. I left my home village in 1987 to attend high school in Loei Province, which is about seventy miles from Banpao. After three years, I went to study in Bangkok. I stayed there for five years.

Then I moved to the University of South Australia to undertake a master's degree. In the peaceful and inspiring natural environment that surrounded this university I discovered that Western art forms had a great deal of scope for a Thai artist like myself. The methods of abstract expressionism, for example, enhanced the Buddhist training I had received at school and at the Thai temple where I had ordained to be a monk during the university summer vacation in 1993<sup>1</sup>. During my studies I combined the techniques of dripping and splashing paper pulp (a modification of Pollock's famous painting style) with the meditative processes that had been taught to me during my education. In *Mind River*, 1996 [illustration 1], the gentleness of the paper pulp technique produced a sense of great tranquillity as I worked and the completed artwork seemed to embody the poise and wellbeing that generated it.

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<sup>1</sup> It is a Thai tradition that men should become a monk for a period of time after they reach twenty years of age. (There is no restriction on the length of time. It can be a few weeks or a life time.)





I was particularly pleased with the expansive glow that appears to explode from the centre of the piece. With works like this I was able to, for the first time in my career, combine Western influences with Thai traditions in a manner that felt entirely authentic.

After completing my MA in 1997 I went to Bangkok to work as an artist and a teacher. I was there for three years before deciding that, paradoxically, the Thai capital city was inhibiting the sense of Thai authenticity I had discovered in Australia. It seemed to me that I needed the tranquillity of a rural environment to recreate the fusion of Western and Eastern ideas I had discovered as a master's student. The problem was that in Bangkok I lived and worked amongst artists who believed that all engagements with Western art entailed urban life-styles. For them, Bangkok approximated the international centres of contemporary art. The aspiration was that the Thai capital could stand in for New York, London and Cologne.



I became frustrated by this unquestioning acceptance of the urban models of progressive art. For me there were many reasons to think differently. For example, Herbert Phillips (1992), whose curatorial work on modern Thai art led to a travelling exhibition of twenty-eight artists in the United States (touring 1991 – 1993), observed that there has been a huge growth in the number of galleries in Bangkok's hotels and tourist shopping centres since the 1960s. How can one create authentic contemporary art a context in which exhibitions in shopping centres regularly attract larger numbers of visitors than Thailand's National Gallery? My conclusion was that Bangkok had little to offer my search for an authentic identity as an artist. At this point I decided to use this experience as the framework for a PhD.

## **The early stages of my research project**

### **Project 1: Buffalo Paintings**

The first artworks I completed at Northumbria University were a series of paintings of buffalos. I used the buffalo as a symbol of Banpao village because these creatures have played such a significant role in farming and farmers have, traditionally, had a close relationship with them. There is also a personal reason derived from my childhood. When I was a boy I used to take my buffalo, inherited from my grand parents, to the river to bathe. This was an opportunity for myself and other children to swim and play.



Illustration 2: Buffalos and herders

Buffalos have a calm nature. It is not uncommon for herders to fall asleep on a buffalo's back while the animals graze in the fields. Traditionally, these animals were used for farm tasks such as ploughing, levelling land and hauling carts. In the famous Burmese invasion in AD 1767, Bang Rajan villagers fought on buffalos rather than horses or elephants. Even though they lost this battle, the buffalo became a symbol of the villagers' fighting spirit.

As I described at the beginning of Chapter two, in the past few years the number of buffalo has declined. The remaining buffalos no longer work on farms but are kept mainly for meat. Only farmers who have a very small acreage would use buffalos as draught animals. In some places, buffalos have become a tourist attraction. For



example, there is a buffalo racing festival in Chonburi Province and buffalo fighting on Samui Island.

The dwindling buffalo population reflects a period of transition in Thai villages. Most of the boys who looked after buffalos in my youth now ride motorcycles for pizza delivery companies in Bangkok. Others have become taxi drivers. Those who still work on the village farms prefer to use small tractors for ploughing and pulling loads. My buffalo paintings were an attempt at representing these changes.

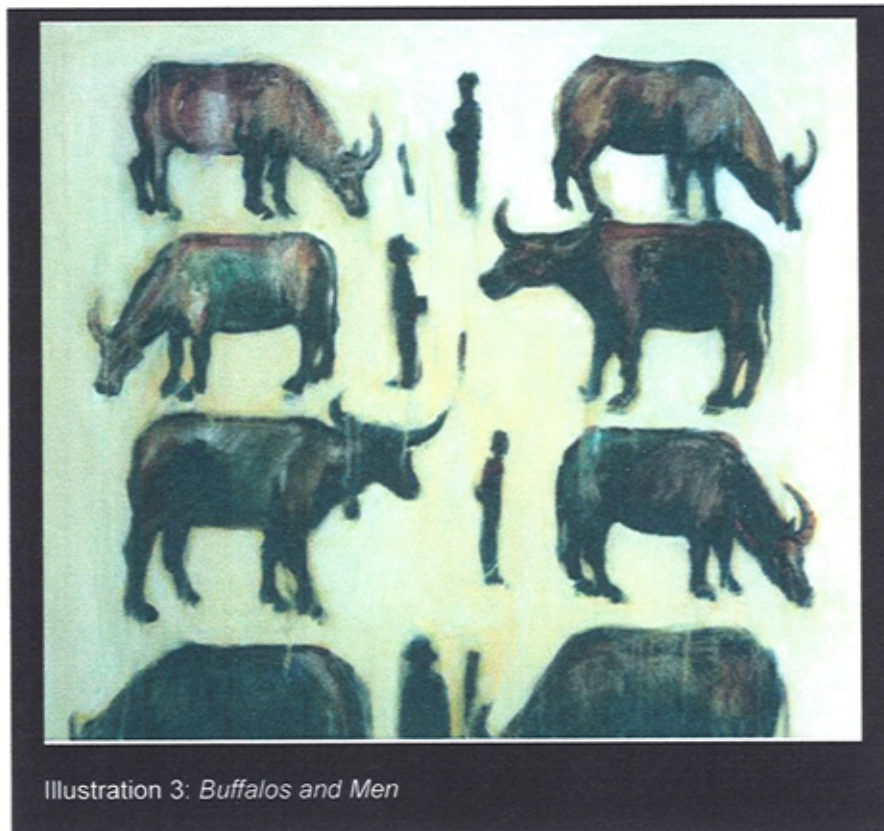


Illustration 3: *Buffalos and Men*

*Buffalos and Men* [Illustration 3] is an example from this series. It was painted in subdued tones. The burnt umber and black paint that I applied to the surface of the canvas with rough brush marks recalled the touch and, through an extended synaesthetic association, the smell of buffalos skin. In contrast, the human figures that stand in the central area of the painting are watching the animals with little sensory engagement. They seem to be dreaming of buffalos not actually sharing the same world. I thought of these figures as versions of myself: either as a city-bound adult who no longer worked the land as my ancestors had done, or as a Thai



artist wondering about rural themes in a foreign country several thousand miles from my place of origin.

Whilst working on this series I began to question the emblematic approach I was taking to ruralism. My buffalo paintings were transforming my personal feelings into a generalised symbol of Thai village life. The result was an over-literal representation. In particular, works like *Buffalos and Men* were involving me in repetitive and pattern-like compositions. I could not seem to find another way of generating images out of the buffalo motif. I worried that the results were too like the deeply ironic renderings of flags, targets, road signs, and company logos introduced into the language of painting by pop artists such as Jasper Johns and Richard Hamilton. I did not want my childhood memories of buffalos (and Banpao) to be thought of as a form of irony or a comment on popular culture. This brought me too close to the Bangkok art I was trying to escape.



Illustration 4: *Floating Memories*

As I struggled to escape the badge-like appearance of these paintings, I experimented with compositional ideas that referred to remembered narratives rather than metonymic images. As a result, in *Floating Memories* [Illustration 4], the last painting in the Buffalo series, I concentrated on a single memory: the story I related above of swimming with these animals in the river near Banpao. As I worked on this final painting I began to understand that I was interested in nostalgic recall not representation. The colours I used did not render the recognisable shades and tints of my subject matter (actual places and events), they evoked the heightened feelings experienced within mnemonic states of mind. To engage in rural themes in a studio at Northumbria University involved experimenting freely with both the process and the idea of recollection.

## **Project 2: Interrupted Landscape**

The next series of artworks addressed the current situation in the Thai rural environment. My intention was to use digital technology to comment on the impact of the modern world on Banpao. I wanted to describe the different ways in which the idyllic landscape I remembered from my childhood had been disrupted by the industrial and commercial expansion of Thailand. I therefore called this series the *Interrupted Landscape*. The pre-industrial methods of farming had been part of Thai life for so long they had seemed like a permanent feature. I wanted to use my creative practice to visualize how heavy machinery and electronic technology was destroying this sense of permanence.

In my studio in Newcastle I began to explore this sense of lost stability with digitally generated distortions of images drawn from my photographic archive. Each collaged image employed a mechanical process that distanced me from the views of my home village recorded in my photographic archive. The blurred and deformed shapes are, I think, good indicators of the fear I felt regularly during the first year of my PhD: I worried that when I returned to Banpao I would no longer be able to understand the environment in which I grew up.





Illustration 5: *Interrupted Landscape*

For example, *Interrupted Landscape* [Illustration 5] uses an image I found in my photographic archive of a neighbour spinning silk thread for weaving (the same documentary material that formed the visual basis of Chapter 2). I emphasised the dark-brown tone of the photograph to reinforce the fact that she was working inside a traditional house. The sunlight shines from above to illuminate both her figure and the spinning tools. This image takes me back to my childhood and the visits I paid to my grandparents. In the morning, my grandmother would sit in the living area of the house preparing thread. The shimmering warm light that shone through the branches and leaves of the tree outside her window created bright spots of light on the polished wooden floor and colourful silk. After my grandparents died, the wooden house was replaced by a concrete one and my family did not continue the ancient tradition of silk weaving. This has happened throughout the village.



The over-dramatised atmosphere that engulfs the figure in a mass of blurred shapes is, for me, an accurate visualisation of the irretrievability of this part of my childhood life. The nostalgic state of mind that caused me to use digital technology in this way seems to fit with the second and third categories of David Halperin's four-point definition of pastoral literature:

[...]

2. Pastoral achieves significance by oppositions, by the set of contrasts, expressed or implied, which the values embodied in its world create with other ways of life. The most traditional contrast is between the little world of natural simplicity and the great world of civilization, power, state craft, ordered society, established codes of behavior, and artifice in general

3. A different kind of contrast equally intimate to pastoral's manner of representation is that between a confused or conflict-ridden reality and the artistic depiction of it as comprehensible, meaningful, or harmonious (Cited in Hunt, ed., 1992: 198-9)<sup>2</sup>.

I was recognising that a 'great world' of technological and cultural power was defining not only my concept of the rural, but also the 'little world' of my remembered rural upbringing. This entangled me in a creative tension between the confused actuality of present-day Banpao (with its TVs and traditional folk customs) and my ability to render the 'conflict-ridden' aspects of contemporary rural life as an artistically harmonious and comprehensible image. I had noticed that as hard as I tried to disrupt photographs of my village with signs of technological manipulation, I still ended up with artworks that displayed the sense of tranquillity that I associate with the therapeutic aspects of nostalgia discussed in Chapter 2.

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<sup>2</sup>The other categories of David Halperin's four-point definition of pastoral literature are:

1. Pastoral is the name commonly given to literature about or pertaining to herdsman and their activities in a country setting; these activities are conventionally assumed to be three in number: caring for the animals under their charge, singing or playing musical instruments, and making love. [...]

4. A work which satisfies the requirements of any two if the three preceding points has fulfilled the necessary and sufficient conditions of pastoral. (Cited in Hunt, ed., 1992: 198-9)

What is the reason for this? In my studio in Newcastle I tended to recollect and reconstruct only good memories about my home. As I worked I was always made the past more pleasant or delightful than it actually was. For example, when I painted the village buffalos I only depicted an ideal version of these creatures. They could be, in fact, rather aggressive and as a boy I experienced many mishaps with them that were now edited from the process of recollection. In the *Interrupted Landscape* series I manipulated the archive images to make them look as beautiful as I could before introducing the process of distortion. Lowenthal (1985) observes that to return to the past in the imagination gives people a chance to undo errors or past wrongs (p. xx).

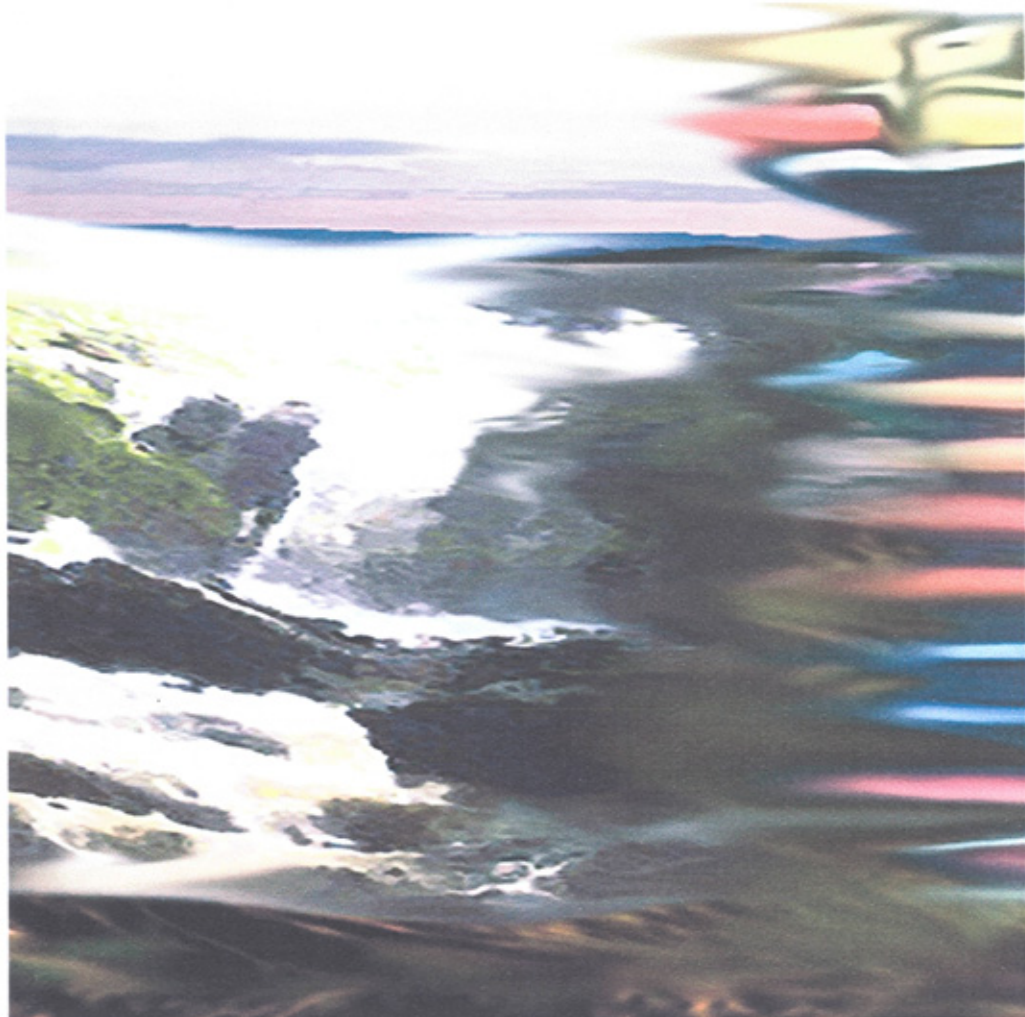


Illustration 6: *Interrupted Landscape 2*



In the last work I made in this series, *Interrupted Landscape 2* [Illustration 6], which is a digital collage of images of the Banpao landscape and colourful neon lights used in the village funfair, the colour of the evening sky seems to harmonise with the artificial light on the right hand side of the picture. This work is more about the pleasure of looking at sympathetic relationships between colours than a critical statement about the impact of modern culture. Several villagers who saw this work (in an exhibition I set up at BRAC in 2002) said that they liked the colourful effects of this work. This was a very interesting reaction. As my practical research progressed, the villagers' responses became increasingly important to my understanding of the real benefits of producing art in a contemporary rural environment.

On the occasions that I returned to Banpao to work on BRAC, I noticed that the villagers were much more prepared than I to fuse modern urban life with their traditional rural practices. They had learnt to absorb and embrace new ways. For example, the New Year celebrations now incorporated recordings of popular music alongside the traditional Molum (a form of local folk music). This would have been unheard of before I left the village to pursue my education. It interested me that when I exhibited my *Interrupted Landscape* series in Banpao, the villagers found it difficult to appreciate the urban/rural distinction on which this series of artworks was based. They did not recognise the interruption.

Unlike most of the Bangkok artists I interviewed in Chapter Two, I started to find the presence of technology, industrial farming and urban life-styles in the village a stimulus to my desire to make rural art. The fact that my perspective as an educational exile was challenged by the actual experience of presenting and exhibiting art at Banpao was an important lesson. As a result, I began to differentiate between the type of nostalgic yearning that was therapy-driven and the search for serenity that could address the contemporary moment. With the models of practice provided by artist such as Damrong and Pratuang I was able to rethink the creative process of rural art as an engagement with 'immediate nostalgia'.



## Immediate Nostalgia

### The integration of past and present: Sensual Stimuli and Memory Recollection

Nostalgia may be a 'universal catchword for looking back' (Lowenthal 1985: 4) and be associated with things and events from the past, but it is, in fact, created within our life in the present. Although the past, like the future, is beyond physical reach, it is integral to our imaginations. Reminiscence and expectation suffuse every present moment' (Lowenthal 1985: 3). The past 'is not simply back there, in a separate and foreign country; it is assimilated in ourselves, and, resurrected into an ever-changing present' (Lowenthal 1985: 412). Lippard says:

The past [...] is constantly being broken down and reintegrated into the present, reinterpreted by historians, curators, anthropologists, popular novelists, and filmmakers. Nostalgia is a way of denying the present as well as keeping some people and places in the past, where we can visit them when we feel like taking a leave of absence from modernity (1997: 85).

It is not only old objects and historic sites that hold stories of the past. Our immediate experiences can also evoke memories of the past. Marcel Proust's famous novel, *Remembrance of Things Past* (Moncrieff and Kilmartin trans, 1983) is an extensive engagement with sudden occurrences of memory. Proust says 'the past is hidden somewhere outside the realm, beyond the reach of intellect, in some material object (in the sensation which that material object will give us) of which we have no inkling' (Moncrieff and Kilmartin trans, 1983: 47).

The novel 'is an account of the life and artistic development of a fictitious individual, Marcel, who is in many respects a replica of the author' (Miller, 1957: 24). Proust remarks that one part of the book is a part of his life, which he had forgotten and which suddenly reoccurred through a familiar sensual incident (Curtiss 1949: 312). Proust shows us how immediate sensations can return our minds to other feelings from the past to relish our lives in the present.

There is a famous incident in the novel that describes the process of recollection through an immediate sensation, which he calls 'involuntary memory' (Curtiss, 1949:231). Marcel tells us how the taste of a madeleine cake dipped in a cup of tea enchants him before he has even recognised the taste as one he had formerly known every morning during his childhood in the rural town of Combray. This incident 'has become a universally accepted symbol of screen memory'<sup>3</sup> and how it may be evoked by a sudden, somewhat trivial sensation' (Miller, 1957:24). In the novel, Proust writes:

I raised to my lips a spoonful of the tea in which I had soaked a morsel of the cake. No sooner had the warm liquid mixed with the crumbs touched my palate than a shudder ran through me and I stopped, intent upon the extraordinary thing that was happening to me. An exquisite pleasure had invaded my senses something isolated, detached, with no suggestion of its origin. And at once the vicissitudes of life had become indifferent to me, its disasters innocuous, its brevity illusory – this new sensation having had on me the effect which love has of filling me with a precious essence; or rather this essence was not in me, it was me. [...] And as soon as I had recognized the taste of the piece of Madeleine soaked in her decoction of lime-blossom which my aunt used to give me (although I did not yet know and must long postpone the discovery of why this memory made me so happy) immediately the old grey house upon the street, where her room was, rose up like a stage set to attach itself to the little pavilion opening on to the garden which had been built out behind it for my parents (the isolated segment which until that moment had been all that I could see); and with the house the town, from morning to night and in all weathers, the Square where I used to be sent before lunch, the streets along which I used to run errands, the country roads we took when it was fine [...] the whole of Combray and its surroundings, taking shape and solidity, sprang into being, town and gardens alike, from my cup of tea (Moncrieff and Kilmartin trans, 1983: 48-51)

Through the recapturing of the lost past Marcel develops 'insight into the fact that it is our innermost feelings (preconscious, or largely unconscious, although he does not use these terms) which impart emotional value to life' (Miller, pp. 104-105). Proust's engagement with the unconscious root of the emotions is a literary parallel to Freud's theory that 'unconscious feelings give the quality of living reality to experience' (Miller 1957: 105). Marcel tells us that he is happy only because the breath of a lost paradise has caused happy memories to return to him involuntarily.

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<sup>3</sup> The term 'screen memory' is derived from Freud's writing: Freud, S. (1899). 'Screen Memories'. *Standard Edition*, 3, 301-322. London: The Hogarth Press. It refers to 'a childhood memory of an insignificant event recalled to block the recall of a [usually previous] significant emotional event' (Oxford Talking Dictionary, 1998. The Learning Company, Inc.)



He remarks: 'the only true paradise is always the paradise we have lost' (Miller 1957: 105). Miller makes an interesting analysis:

Marcel gives us as the reason for his intense nostalgic gratification the following explanation: when he actually lived through important moments of his life, their reality was sullied by feelings of fatigue, sadness, anxiety, or lack of sufficient perspective to estimate their true meaning. Art [the novel], his own recreation of life, condenses past and present. He can live outside of time, now, in retrospect, and thus enjoy the true essences of life. [...] He describes the recollection of a past self, blending with the present self and with present experience and arriving at a synthesis more meaningful, more aware, than any creature less than man could achieve (pp. 106-107).

Here we can see that Proust's nostalgia has therapeutic value. His pleasure of recalling the past helps him to escape from the torment of the chronic asthma, he developed in his childhood. However it would be reductive to the richness of his novel to think that Proust's approach is intended as a therapy for his illness. The credibility of his writing rests on his highly creative skill in rendering the integration of past preconscious feelings (summoned by immediate stimuli) in the present.

Lowenthal (1985) sees Proust's sensory recall as a way of using the past to enrich the present. 'Celebrating the pleasure of recollection, Proust's Marcel compares his present personality to an abandoned quarry [...] from which memory, selecting here and there, can, like some Greek sculptor, extract innumerable different statues'(p.49). Lowenthal remarks that a 'well-loved past enriches the world around us. The present when backed by the past is a thousand times deeper than the present when it presses so close that you can feel nothing else' (pp. 47-48).

## **Memory recollection and my artistic experience**

During my studio activities at Northumbria University several incidents brought back happy childhood memories. And these memories, as Lowenthal (1985) describes, enriched my sensual and perceptual experience of the present (pp. 47-48). Once a memory is integrated with the present, I felt at home even though I was in exile. In this sense the meaning of 'home' has little to do with an actual parental house or a physical village. To feel at home, one simply needs to escape an unsatisfactory (or



less happy) aspect of the present. Thus recollection or sensory reconnection is a way to bring home-ness to unfamiliar places and difficult times.

I am now going to describe my experiences of sensory reconnection and home-ness. However, I must first make one qualification. In Proust, recollection was caused by the *same* sensual stimuli occurring to the narrator in the past and the present (e.g. the taste of the madeleine in the present mirrors the same taste in the past). However, during my stay in Newcastle, I found that the process of recollection involved *unfamiliar* stimuli that generated parallel associations.

For example, the first time I walked along a street covered with snow, the sound and the feeling under my feet immediately reminded me of my family's farm. The sensation of walking on snow was linked to the experience of treading on the soft sand around our farmhouse and outbuildings. In particular, the frozen surface of the snow behaved in a similar fashion to sand that has just dried after being soaked by rain. As I crunched my way through the snow, the large tree that grows beside my parent's hut sprang up clearly in my mind. I could also see my father planting cassava trees in the nearby field.

This seems such a surprising association to make on a bitterly cold winter day in northeast England. Nothing could seem more distant than my tropical home in Thailand. However, the two locations of my practical research (having already helped me to understand the role of nostalgic yearning) now gave me an opportunity to reflect on the creative power of sensory experiences in both urban and rural environments. The fact that I could associate urban snow with rural sand had a liberating effect on my practical work. I stopped trying to create images about the incompatible nature of village and city life and began to take the interpenetration of urban and rural experiences more seriously.



Illustration 7: *Footprints*

I now began to develop a collage technique that, through the digital manipulation of photographs (the process I first explored in the *Interrupted Landscape* series), integrated and fused the visual world that surrounded me in Newcastle with my photographic archive of life in Banpao. Pieces such as *Snow Walk* [Illustration 8] were created by searching through the hundreds of photographs I had taken in Banpao looking for sand images that would correspond to my new photographs of



snow. Having digitalised these source images I then mixed together the surface details to emphasise the 'close up' feeling of treading on sand and snow. The resulting compositions adapted, for the purposes of Thai rural art, the shallow space developed by abstract painters such as Jackson Pollock. In my collages this form of painterly space became a field of pictorial collisions in which surface is everything. For the first time since I completed my MA course I was able to synthesize authentic rural experiences from Thailand with one of the founding principles of Western progressiveness.



Illustration 8: *Snow Walk*



Following the snow experience (for me an epiphanic moment that changed the direction of my practical research) I became extremely sensitive to the unexpected memory triggers that lay in wait as I went about my daily activities.

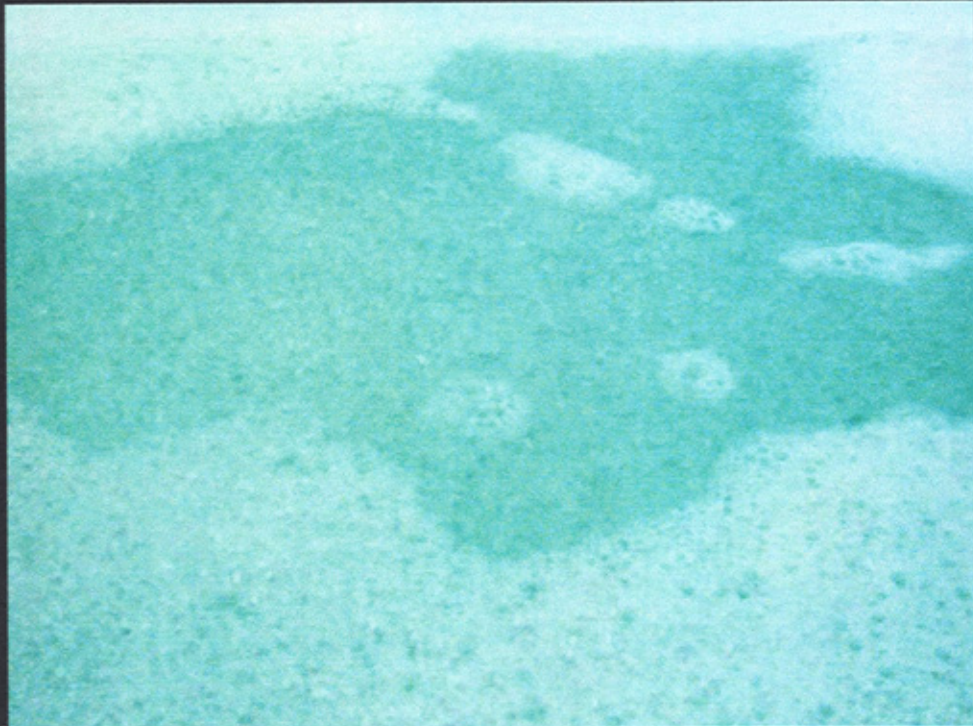


Illustration 9: *Memory Recollection* (from the bath)

Even the humdrum business of taking a bath surprised me with sudden memory rents in the fabric of the Newcastle environment. As I lay soaking, with my eyes just above the water, the shower (which I had left running) was beating on the surface of the water in a manner reminiscent of rain on the village pond in Banpao. Within a flash I was examining the loosely woven wire fence that separates the pond from the vast rice field that is situated next to it. This field is often shrouded in a misty green haze and I could now see this colour in the steamy atmosphere of the bathroom. As I let the associations flow, I found that I could smell the nearby village street damp with recent rain and then move myself along this thoroughfare inspecting my neighbour's houses one by one.



Illustration 10: Surface of the pond on a rainy day

On this occasion I noted that involuntary memory was not just about reliving the past in the present but an active reconstruction and re-inhabitation of the home I was yearning for. My ability to imagine my Thai past in a Newcastle bathroom also involved the anticipation of my future responses to the environment from which I had been estranged. At this point I was beginning to engage creatively with the idea, noted by writers such as Lippard and Lowenthal, that nostalgia generates *illusions* of home. These can be versions of home that have not yet come into existence.

A series of experimental collages followed from the bathroom experience. They were produced using the same process as the *Snow Walk* collages. I combined a photograph taken in my bathroom with an older photograph of the pond at Banpao and once again, in bringing the two worlds together, I found myself excited by the visual effect of the resulting image. In the artwork I was simultaneously presented with the familiar but unreachable pond and the nearer, more tangible bathwater. The soapy froth dominated the image in the same way that the tactile surface of



brushwork can provide the primary formal quality in the shallow space of an abstract painting.



An incidental but important association also struck me at the time. In some of the final prints of this collage the colour of the froth reminded me of chemical pollution. I had struggled to address the impact of the technology and industry in the *Interrupted Landscape* series and not achieved my goals. Here I was (unintentionally) expressing my concerns in a response to the artwork that seemed close to the immediate nostalgia I had experienced in the bathroom. If I could imagine Banpao in the bath in Newcastle, I could also, it seemed, suddenly feel fear and displeasure (as if I was responding to poison in the actual village water supply) when looking at an artwork that I had, until then, thought of as entirely dream-like and tranquil in its effect. This was a lesson to take forward in future works.

By now I had created a large number of artworks at Northumbria University and had received a great deal of feedback from UK artists. I had also set up exhibitions in Banpao and had satisfied myself that, with the inauguration of BRAC, I had initiated



a productive context for a continuing dialogue with a present-day Thai rural community. The result was that there had been two shifts in my practical research: (1) although I had not stopped painting I was now concentrating on large digital photographic collages; (2) I had discovered a type of shallow-pictorial space (of which *Snow Walk* was the first example) that allowed me to mix photographic material from rural Thailand and urban England. There had also been changes at a conceptual level: (1) exile in a city had become a creative impetus for a new way of making rural art and, as a result, (2) the grip of Thai authenticity had been transformed into more inventive idea about the present-moment context of my Thai imagination. These changes within my practical work reflected a growth in my understanding of the use of nostalgia as a primer for the process of imagining. At the beginning of my research project I had experienced feelings of homesickness that used the missing past as a form of therapy. Now I was exploring nostalgia as a form of heightened sensitivity to all aspects of the city and village environments, as an imaginative engagement with the most immediate sensations of everyday life.

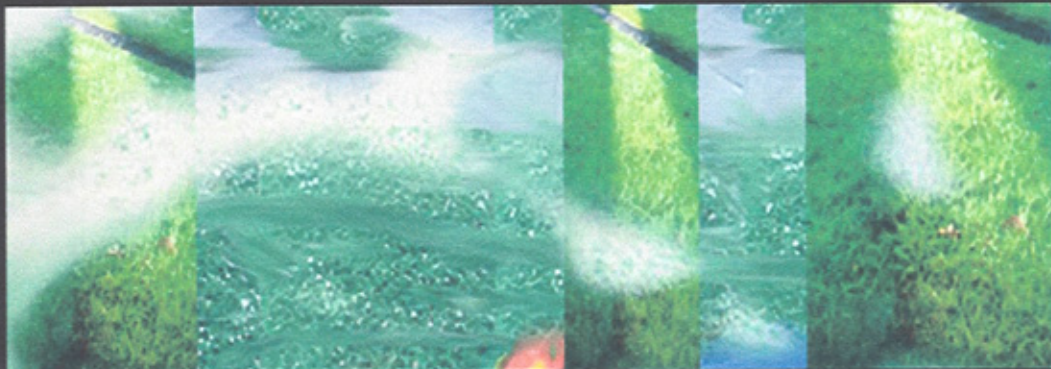


Illustration 12: Memory recollection series

The key device in these changes had been the photographic image: to begin with I was continually drawing on my archive of Banpao photographs but as I became bolder with the idea of nostalgia I also began building up a collection of photographs taken in Newcastle. These new photographs offered me, like the snow itself, a sense of 'home-ness' in a strange place. I could use them to repair and make good my state of exile.

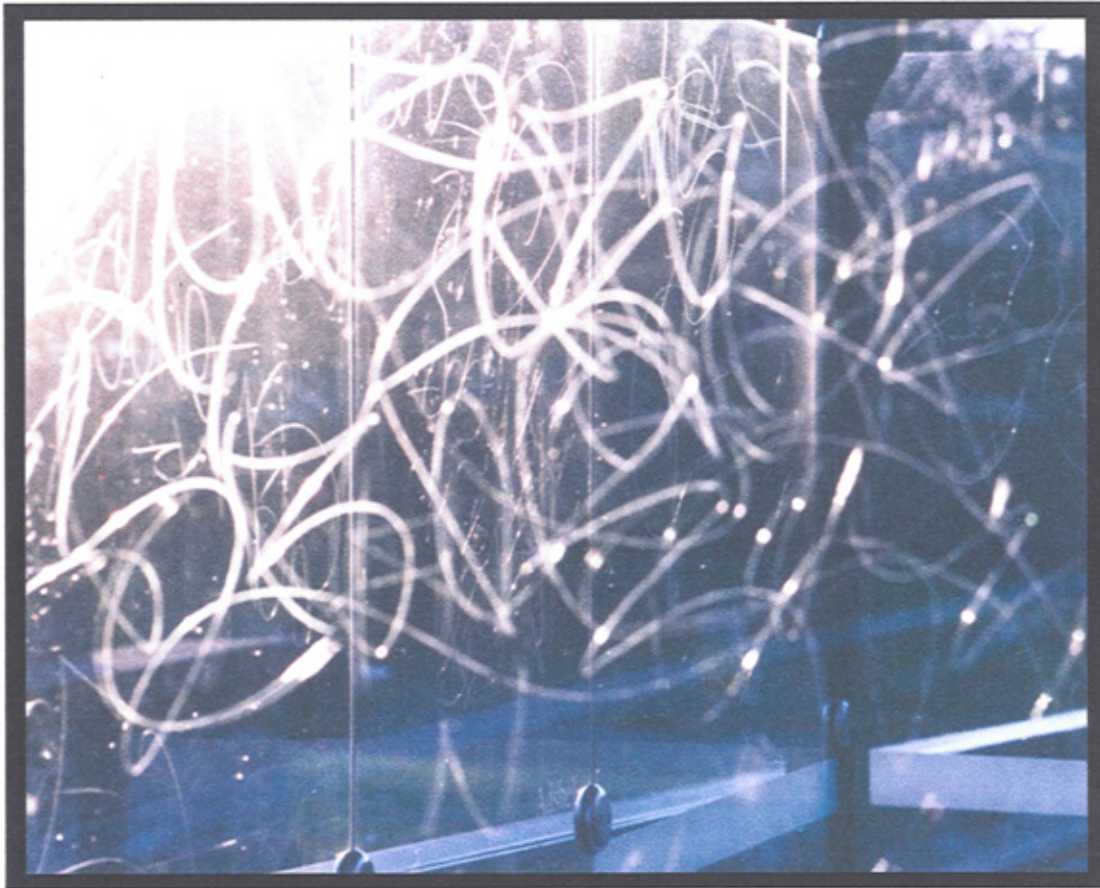


Illustration 13: A photograph taken in Newcastle

However, once I had collaged these new photographs with images of Banpao, an art object was created that had a visual life of its own. As I said above, this visual liveliness had a lot to do with the power of surface details. Although each detail referred to either rural Thailand or urban England, the collage was not, in itself, nostalgic. I now realised that I had a method of transforming nostalgic yearnings into non-nostalgic artworks. This was the big step that would lead to the kind of fine art practice I wanted to pursue at BRAC.

And so, in order to further develop my rural arts centre I returned to Thailand for four months in 2002. On my return I noticed that I had re-entered my home environment with extended levels of sensory awareness; I was now more observant and noticed unexpected detail in places I thought I knew intimately. As in Newcastle, any experience could suddenly arouse nostalgic reverie and, as the power of immediate nostalgia increasingly affected me, a new period of Banpao



photography began. For the first time I used my camera not to document my home environment but to seek out evocative surfaces for my collages.

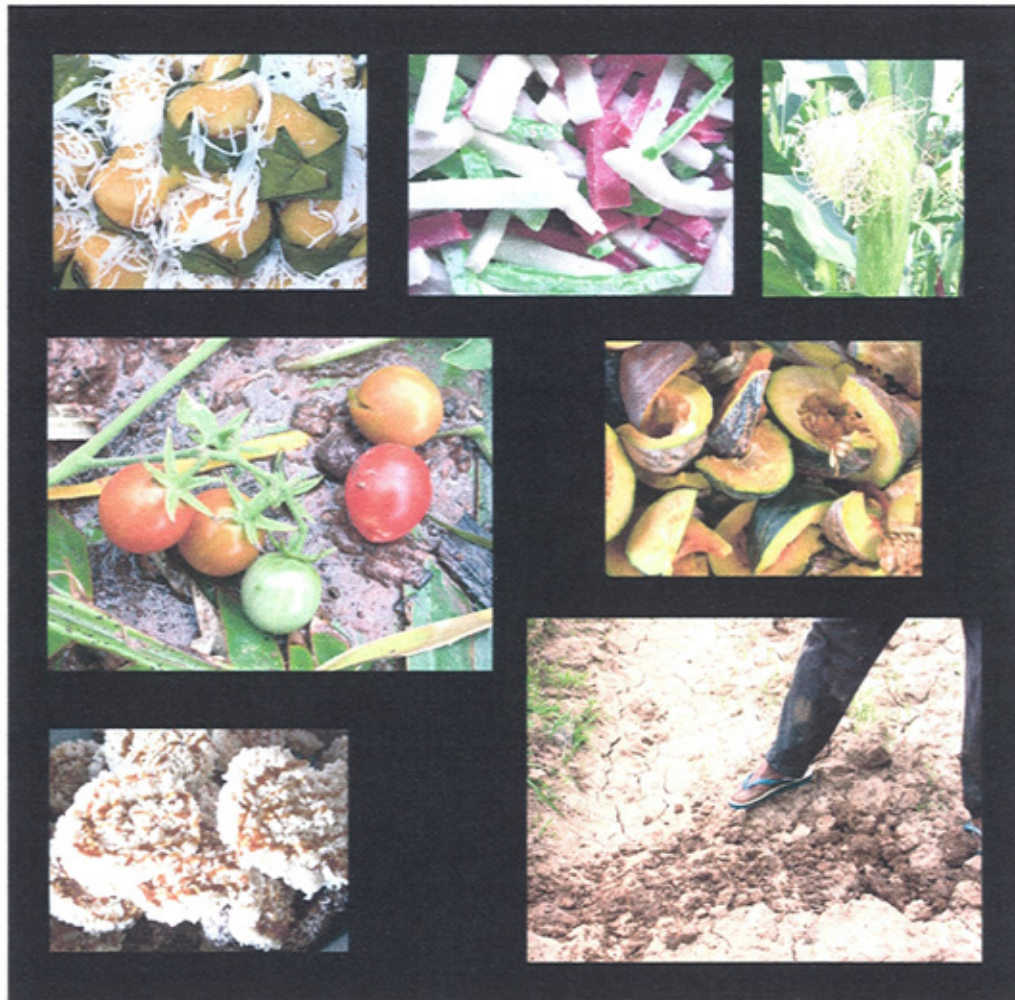


Illustration 14: Banpao surfaces

Another idea struck me. The imaginative and fictional aspects of my Banpao reveries in Newcastle were now informing my engagement with the real place. To a certain extent, they were dictating where I pointed my camera. My feelings about Banpao had been changed by my reactions to snow and bathwater in Newcastle and, as a result, the visual strength of these distant responses now guided me towards a surface-oriented exploration of the village in which I grew up. Despite the welcoming familiarity of everything I encountered, I was in a new world.



These changes in my practice owed a great deal to my readings on the methods of Marcel Proust. The consequence was a rapid maturation of my activities as an artist. Before describing the collages that emerged from my photographic re-engagement with Banpao, I think it will be helpful to briefly recall some parallel ideas that were initiated by my discussions with the Buddhist artists at the end of Chapter 2. Whilst interviewing Pratuang and Damrong, I had been interested by their ability to find tranquillity and simplicity in the face of the complexity of modern life. During the period in which I had returned to Banpao I started to examine an area of theoretical writing that seemed to relate to both the Buddhist position and my new creative engagement with the village. The next section provides an account of the ideas of some celebrated environmental aestheticians.

### **The cognitive and non-cognitive approaches to the appreciation of a rural environment**

Through my re-engagement with the actual contemporary agricultural environment at Banpao, I became increasingly interested in environmental aesthetics. In particular, I started to study the books written by Allen Carlson. Carlson (2002b) has distinguished two basic approaches to environmental appreciation. First, the 'engagement' approach is based on immediate sensory involvement with the objects of the environment at large, aiming at total, multi-sensory immersion. This approach can result in various kinds of sensual and emotional responses, such as arousal, awe, wonder, mystery, etc. Carlson considers this approach as a form of non-cognitive appreciation because appreciators only need to immerse themselves in the environment and enjoy what they can. (I shall refer to this model as 'non-cognitive' approach hereafter.) Second, in contrast, the cognitive approach requires knowledge of the object of appreciation. Such knowledge helps to adjust our senses and attitudes to appropriately appreciate certain objects or environments. Carlson asserts that a scientific understanding of nature can help to enhance the way we appreciate natural environments, just as knowledge of an artistic medium, tradition, styles, etc. can help the art critic or an art audience to be more equipped to appreciate works of art. Carlson uses the example of appreciating the

environments created by modern agriculture. It is important to understand the functional utility of cultivating vast fields devoted to single crops. Such knowledge enlarges and adjusts our frame of reference and our attitudes to the sweeping, uniform landscapes that result from such farming practices. Arnold Berleant (1970) has a similar observation on appreciating art. He asserts

When it is aesthetic, intuition takes one back before knowledge, before recognition. It makes one aware of the immediacy of experience and of the directness of one's response to it. That is why there is such a strong sensory factor in the experience of art. But when experience is given a cognitive turn, we move beyond the indiscriminate fullness of immediate experience to the selection of those data that will serve as evidence for sound and rational judgment, and on this evidence we construct arguments and perform inferences. Consequently, cognition leaves behind the living directness of sensory perception by using it as a means to conceptual conclusions and effective applications. (p. 118-119)

Carlson's non-cognitive approach and Berleant's notion of the aesthetic follows the thinking of the German philosopher, Immanuel Kant (1724 – 1804). In the opening of the first 'movement' of his *Critique of Aesthetic Judgement*, Kant writes

If we wish to discern whether anything is beautiful or not; we do not refer the representation of it to the Object by means of understanding with a view to cognition, but by means of the imagination [...] we refer the representation to the Subject and its feeling of pleasure or displeasure. The judgement of taste, therefore, is not a cognitive judgement, and so not logical, but is aesthetic—which means that it is one whose determining ground cannot be other than subjective. (1911: 41-42, trans. Meredith)

Kant's idea is that our aesthetic response does not depend on a cognitive judgement or a concept of an object. It is a feeling of delight that arises directly from perceptual experience of an object. In other words, 'knowledge is not the basis of aesthetic appreciation, but rather the feeling of pleasure that comes through perception of the object and the harmonious free play of the mental power' (Pratt, et. al., 2000:145). This mode of appreciation is also similar to the way children react to the environment. Developmental psychologists Sheldon and Barbara Notkin White (1980) observe that children experience the immediacy of the environment. They enjoy each moment without having to carry knowledge around in their heads (p. 51). Unlike adults, who act on the flow of their own ideas, comment on them and manage them, children live in 'a world of happenings, a world in which they are less sure and less concerned about why this is here, that is there, or why this has come



before that. They live in the 'now', their thoughts and experiences shifting with the flow of sensory impressions' (p.49). By living in the world of happenings, they become an integral part of the environment, and as a result, they can enjoy the immediate sensations of being stimulated by environmental experiences. Yi-fu Tuan says that the terrain of late childhood penetrates our lives and memories (cited in Lippard 1997:33). Although we cannot become a child again, we can go back to our childhood through a memory recall — nostalgia, which can be a 'time machine'<sup>4</sup> to bring us closer to a child's way of perceiving a world filled with delight.

David Nash seemed to be describing the visual arts dimension of this idea during my conversation with him in his studio in 2001. He said: 'when I found I wasn't free [to create fluently], I went back to working like I did as a child [...] working like when you are three or four years old and going to a playroom'. Nash's approach to his art, seen in Carlson's terms, contains both cognitive and non-cognitive aspects. He wanted to free his mind and immerse himself in the immediate sensations of the environment. However, at the same time, he has also developed an intimate understanding of the nature of wood. His skills are based on a profound knowledge of the properties of the natural material out of which he creates his sculptures. For example, the surfaces of some of the new work I saw in his studio were covered with small cracks that I assumed to be the result of natural shrinkage caused by bringing the green wood inside a heated room. In fact, the cracking had been deliberately induced by Nash to speed up the drying process.

Carlson tends to give more weight to the cognitive approach, as he believes that knowledge can help to deepen our appreciation. However, he is still aware of the interwoven nature of the two approaches. Hence he concludes that both aspects can be combined in order to *balance* the utilisation of feeling and knowing in aesthetic experience. For an artist like Nash, this combination is at the heart of the creative process and does not require theorisation: it is simply part of one's artistic approach. Within my practical-led doctoral research, I was now also discovering

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<sup>4</sup> Similar to the 'time machine', in his book, *The Country and the City*, Raymond Williams (1973) calls his memory an 'escalator'. Williams takes his readers through time and space, from the country to the city and back.



(from inside creative activity) my own version of this *balance* between immediate reactions and the process of understanding the actual properties of the contemporary rural environment. I now want to describe some experiments I made at Banpao whilst reading about environmental aesthetics.

### **Cognitive and non-cognitive approaches in my art practice**

On my return to my home village I was primed through my reading of Carlson to combine my cognitive and non-cognitive responses to the environment in which I had set up my rural arts centre.

On the cognitive side, my local expertise guided my appreciation of the plants in the gardened area that surrounds BRAC. Some of these plants are food and some are medicines and I have been acquiring this kind of knowledge since my childhood. For example, the trees in the immediate vicinity of the Centre were planted by my grandmother and I was instructed in their attributes as I helped her tend the garden when I was young.

The non-cognitive aspects of my appreciation have been evolving since my childhood. A sense of being immersed in nature was first developed through play. Later, as my parents gave me simple agricultural tasks to perform, my farm work increased the range of stimuli I encountered in the environment. Finally, as my career as an artist progressed, the range and sensitivity of my feelings has been increasingly refined.

In the period of practical research that followed my return to Banpao, I noticed that my reactions to the environment (for example, in the BRAC garden) involved the interweaving of knowing and feeling described by Carlson. I would identify trees and flowers and then suddenly switch to intuitive engagements with colours and textures. It seemed to me that Carlson's 'balance' idea was a very good way of

explaining the immediacy of immediate nostalgia. On the one hand I might walk along a village path and 'know' that the leaves before me belong to banana trees and that the old tractor tyre on the ground was left there by my neighbour. On the other hand, in contrast to the steady pace of cognitive appreciation, I might suddenly 'feel' all sorts of nostalgic associations as I encountered the colours and the smell of these objects. These could include reminiscences related to events in my childhood, recent dreams, journeys undertaken as student in Australia, or mental connections that are too complex to put into words. Because immediate nostalgia, like Kant's aesthetics, does not require cognitive judgement, the feelings that I experience as I walk along the path are as likely to have been caused by the smell of hot rubber as they are by the verdant green of the banana plants.

The useful aspect of Carlson's 'balance' idea is that the two modes of appreciation are distinct (you do not 'know' and 'feel' at the same time) but the shift between the two can be so rapid that they appear to be woven into one complex immersive involvement with the environment. A pictorial version of this concept might look rather like the *Snow Walk* collage (on page 96). In the shallow space created by this kind of artwork, the photographic fragments of Newcastle and Banpao weave together but do not merge. They remain two worlds of entirely different cognitive 'know-how'. However, once seen as a single surface, the viewer is suddenly free to enjoy the images non-cognitively. As this happens, the experience of immediate nostalgia unites all cognitive difference. This is the aesthetic experience created by the shallow non-pictorial space that I have developed in my collages.

As I began to absorb the implications of Carlson's idea I was struck by its ability to clarify the procedures by which my new collages were made and, as a result, started to undertake experiments that would test the potential of this idea in future BRAC projects. I was beginning to wonder what a UK artist would make of the opportunity to make rural art in Thailand.



The *Snow Walk* collage had been created because Newcastle snow made me think of Banpao sand. I now wanted to immerse myself in the tropical environment around me to see if immediate nostalgia would work the other way round. I decided to engage in agricultural and domestic work with my parents and, thinking of the 'close ups' of footsteps in *Snow Walk*, began photographing my own and my families' hands and feet as we prepared food and worked the soil.

In my parent's garden the family routines involved tending the chillies, lemongrass, tomatoes and pumpkins. The photographs below were taken as I followed my grandmother's hands as she inspected and picked leaves for our meal.



Illustration 15: My grandmother in BRAC garden

Later, as I helped my grandmother gather together garden produce, I was aware of the divergence of cognitive backgrounds that now separated us. I told her about the city parks in England and realised that a new range of British experiences had accumulated in my mind during my stay in Newcastle. For example, I had spent a great deal of time in Heaton Park. If one lives, as I did, in the urban environment



that surrounds this park, then entering this green space is like entering a type of paradise.

As part of my research I had visited the *Arcadia in the City* exhibition, 2002 at Marble Hill House in London and learnt about the European passion for the picturesque. Many grand European gardens incorporated a perfect point of view, an undisturbed vista across the countryside that suggested that the industrial revolution had not taken place. Everything was designed to open out into uninterrupted spaces and, as a result, the emphasis was on the physically remote. In Heaton Park I noticed how far apart people stayed. Everybody viewed everybody else from a distance; we all remained tiny figures as we sunbathed, jogged, or took the dog for a walk.

For my grandmother, this was a very unfamiliar idea about gardens. The patch of land which we garden creates a very intimate relationship between our bodies and the surrounding 'natural' features. One is immersed within the densely growing plants and, in the end, takes large amounts of the local flora into the body as food. As we talked together, we were both in Carlson's cognitive mode of appreciation. We were sharing our knowledge of the Banpao garden and Heaton Park in Newcastle.

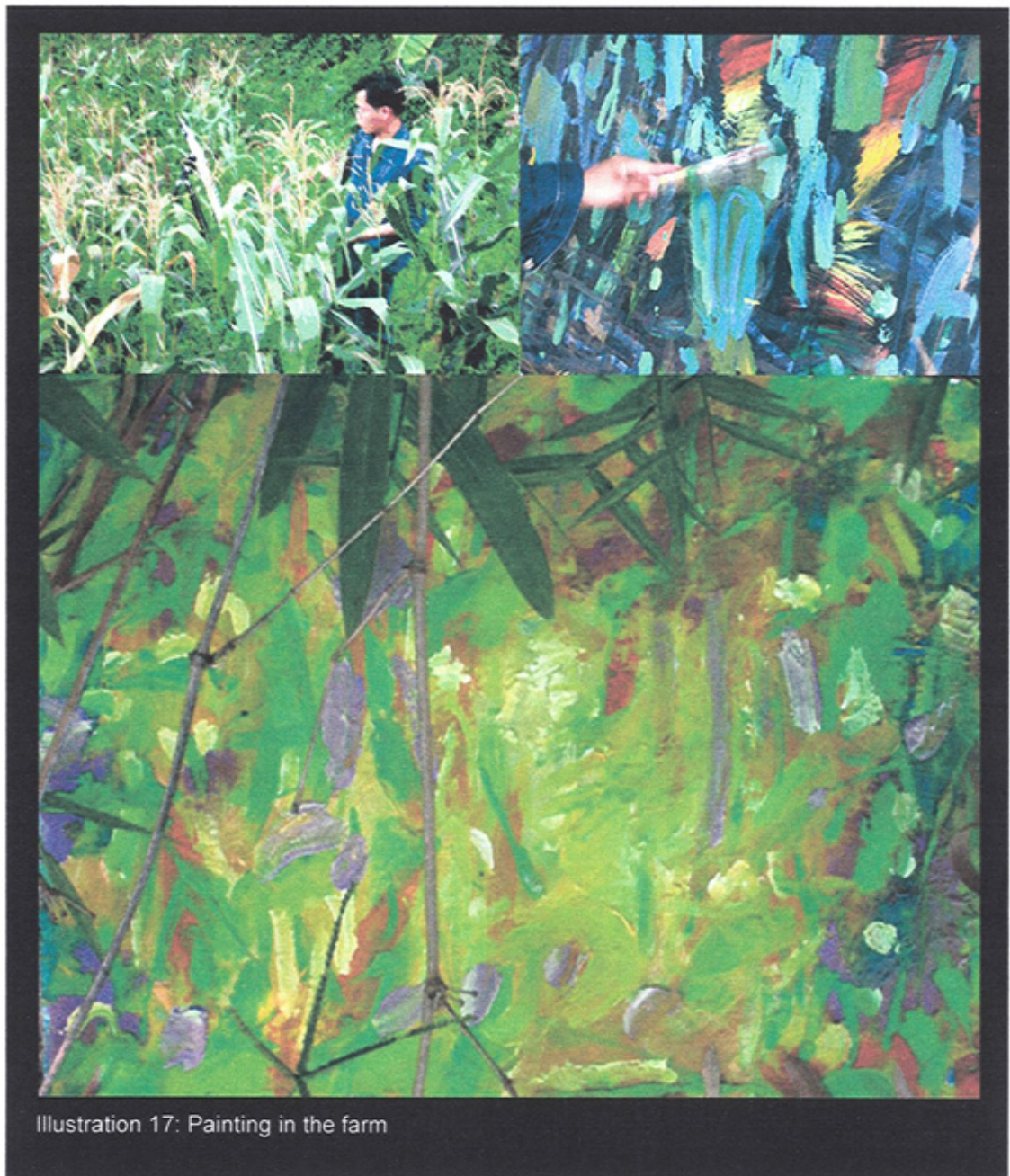


Illustration 16: *Picking Leaves*

However, the spots of sunlight on the leaves as our hands pulled and pushed at each plant did generate sudden associations. These were not triggered by the environment but by the actions of our hands. I began to think about the process of painting with the vibrant richness of the pigments that feed the eye as one moves a brush across a palette or a canvas. Within seconds I could recall the smell of art materials that are such an important part of the atmosphere of the studios at Northumbria University. And so, a non-cognitive nostalgic yearning was achieved. For the first time, immediate nostalgia took me back to the lost world of my studio in England, the place where I had been undertaking the practical aspects of my research.

As a result, I began work on a new series of Banpao collages that explored the correspondence between the BRAC studio and its garden. The example above, *Picking Leaves*, used digital technology to 'balance' photographic images of my grandmother's and my own hands at work. She holds freshly picked vegetables (as she has throughout her rural life) and I hold a paintbrush loaded with paint (as I have since I moved away to distant cities to become an artist).





Thus the studio at BRAC became a site of immediate nostalgia through the potential that painting had to reconnect me with Newcastle. The ongoing nature of my studio practice became, in relation to the non-cognitive mode of appreciation, more important than the need to complete and exhibit paintings (I shall return to this idea in Chapter 4 when I discuss the theories of the philosopher John Dewey). In this sense the process of documenting my studio activities with a camera became a



creative practice in its own right. I began to photograph my work in the same way that I photographed village work. And as this archive of photographic documentation grew, I found that I had the two types of photographic source material available to me at BRAC. With these two types of image I could produce collages that followed the model set up by *Snow Walk* and *Bath/Pond*.

What follows is an account of the process of combining photographs of agricultural work with those of my studio methods. In many ways the resulting collages represent the culmination of the practical part of my research.



Illustration 18: *Rice Sowings*

The farmer who owns this field is Po Lerm. He is a neighbour and long-term friend of my family. Whilst I helped him with sowing rice he told me about his problems with the lack of rain. Even so, the field is like a quagmire. When I started taking photographs he became interested in my ideas for a rural arts centre in the village. I photographed him at work and then, when I took a turn, he photographed my feet as I walked up and down through the mud.



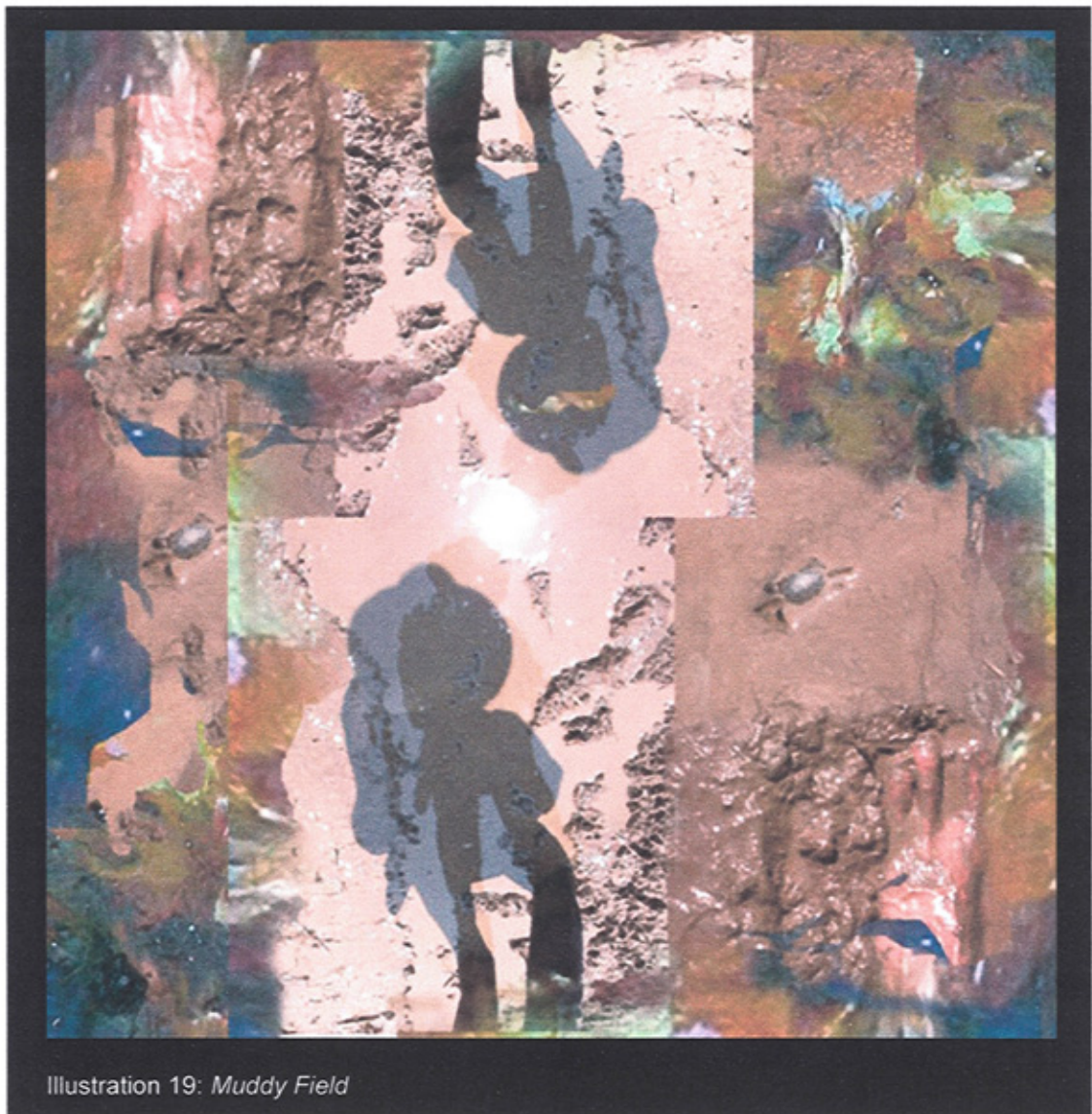


Illustration 19: *Muddy Field*

*Muddy Field* [Illustration 19] is the first BRAC version of *Snow Walk* and it was the result of taking photographs in Po Lerm's field. I combined images of my feet treading in the wet mire of the paddy field with some close-up shots of the impasto surfaces on one of my most recent paintings. There was, for me, an obvious association between the sticky mud and the thickly applied wet paint. The central idea of this collage was that the squelching sensation of mud was capable of recalling experiences in the studio. The field reminded me of some advice I had been given as a student. The best way to prepare primers and grounds for paintings is to submerge ones hand in the mixing bowl and stir the volume of paint

from the bottom of the liquid. Po Lerm enjoyed the comparison and this added to his appreciation of the collage once it was finished. To a limited extent he felt like a co-author.

It is important to understand that my engagement with village life was not limited to farm work and gardening, I also helped villagers weave fabrics, matting, and baskets.

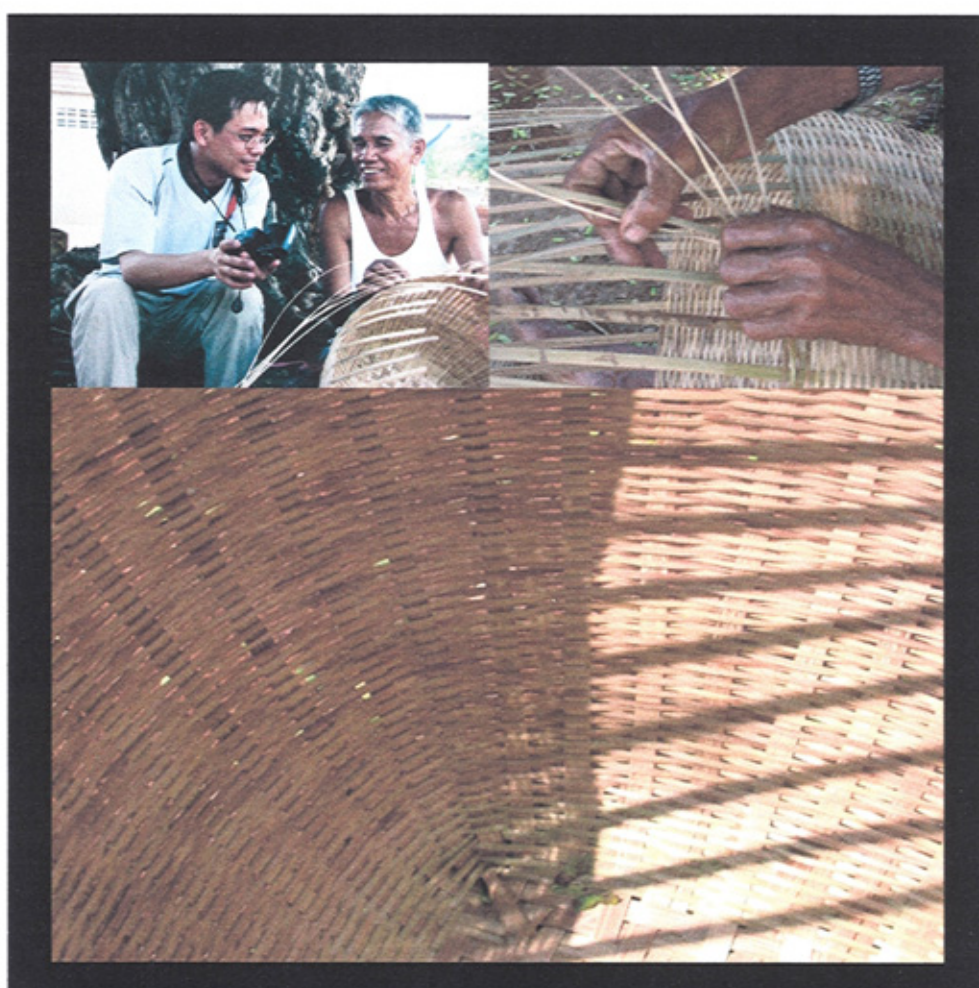


Illustration 20: *Uncle Swai*, a former village Headman weaving a basket

The retired headman is the most respected person in the village. Despite his special position, after his farm work is done he weaves baskets for the family and to sell.



As I extended my photographic documentation of the different kinds of work I found in my home village, I began to plan new collages that would, to (once again) use Carlson's term, 'balance' rural practices with the activities in my studio. I made collages that combined my hands using a palette knife and my neighbour's hands pushing a weaving shuttle as they wove a length of patterned cloth. I like the obvious parallels: both types of work are producing coloured surfaces and both entail aesthetic appreciation. In addition, the knife and the shuttle created similar shapes on the surface of the collage. It was easy for my neighbour to cross-reference the pleasure of weaving to the enjoyment I have when painting with a palette knife. It seems that the metaphor of weaving (for example, Carlson's idea of an interwoven surface holding together knowing and feeling) is a very accessible way of understanding the work I am doing at BRAC.



Illustration 21: Weaving in Banpao

The final collages produced at BRAC form the main body of practical work submitted alongside this thesis. In order to understand these collages as a development within my practice as a fine artist, I now need to give a short account of the way in which my activities as a painter have been superseded by my use of photography. As this shift in approach began I read widely within the literature concerning art and photography and I will use a range of sources from this field to map my own ideas.



Illustration 22: The Banpao weaving community



Perhaps the most famous writer on photography is Susan Sontag (1977) who, following the seminal work of Roland Barthes linked the cultural value of the photographic image to its ability to provide information. This distinguished the work of the photographer from that of the painter even though both activities could be used for factual and fictional purposes. I like John Berger's comment that a photograph has to be 'stencilled off the real, like a footprint' (cited in Geoff Dyer, ed. 2001: 187). The point is that, in comparison to a painting, a photograph is always 'something seen rather than imagined' (Clarke, 1997: 187).

The writer Jonathan Friday (2002) has an interesting and useful concept for the modes of picturing that lay outside the use of lens-based imagery. He calls activities such as painting 'manugraphy':

A photograph always depicts real and existing objects at a particular moment in time because the necessary first step in the photochemical process [...] is the exposure of film to light reflected from the real world. [...] Manugraphy, by contrast, does not necessarily picture the real world, to the extent that it does, it is the real world mediated by the mind and skill of the artist. (2002: 38 – 39)

With the development of the collage technique (following the experiments of Cubist painters such as Picasso and Braque) photographers were given an opportunity to explore the manugraphic potential of the camera. Scruton (1983) describes how the collaging of photographs generates an art object that can be appreciated like a painting. It is through the process of arrangement, combination and juxtaposition that a photographic collage can express the kinds of visual ideas usually explored by painters.

In the context of my own artistic practice at BRAC, the painterly idea that I investigated through photographic collage was derived from the work of abstract expressionists such as Jackson Pollock. This was not a new concern. I had been interested in the shallow (and, I felt, meditative) space created in Pollock's paintings since I was a master's student in Australia (see p. 81). These paintings have a quality that Clement Greenberg described as being '[...] left alone with shapes and

colours' (1959:80) and that Hilla Rebay said needed '[...] no meaning, [they are just] lovely to our eyes as music is lovely to our ears' (1982:145).



Illustration 23: Jackson Pollock *Blue poles: Number 11*, 1952

Clearly the effect of abstract expressionist painting is close to Carlson's non-cognitive mode of aesthetic appreciation. Mel Gooding, who has written extensively on environmentalism and art, has described abstract painting as giving the viewer 'unprecedented freedom' (2001:10) and it is this scope for open-ended, non-cognitive engagement that eclipses and transforms the 'footprint' of the real carried by my photographic documentation.

One further aspect of my photographic collages needs to be outlined before leaving the images to speak for themselves. Whilst my current work uses collage in every sense described above, this term does not entirely capture the process by which the images of village work were interwoven with those of my studio practices. A more accurate description would be 'digital collage'. The revolutionary collages of the Cubists, Dadaists and Surrealists were created by arranging photographic images either alongside or on top of each other. With the development of computer software that stores and manipulates visual information it is now possible to give opaque images transparency and then overlay countless levels of pictorial material



to create layered patterns and complex surfaces. The final series of collages produced at BRAC made full use of this technological opportunity.

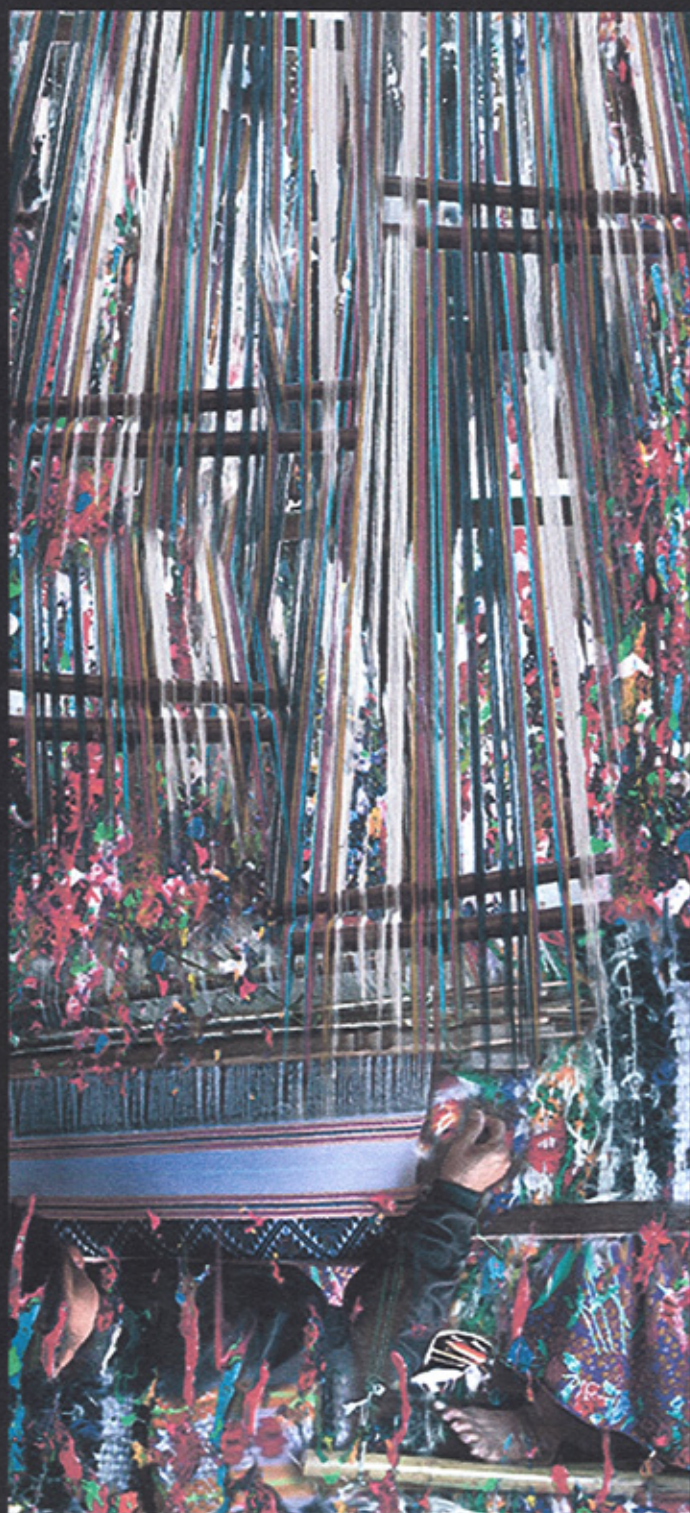


Illustration 24: *Weaving1*





Illustration 25: *Weaving2*

However, it is worth pointing out that the capacity of computer technology to print digital collages directly onto painting canvas also provided an important technical step in the production of artworks at BRAC. The theorist of contemporary digital art Christian Paul divides the current range of digital imaging experiments into two categories: firstly, there is art that 'uses digital technologies as a *tool* for the creation of traditional objects – such as a photographs, prints, sculptures or music'; secondly there is art that 'employs these technologies as its very own *medium*, being produced, stored and presented exclusively in the digital format and making use of its interactive or participatory features' (2003: 8).



I consider my work at BRAC to have been within Paul's first (apparently less adventurous) category. However using computers instrumentally, as a tool for producing conventional artworks, does not necessarily downgrade the radical nature of the new technology. What interests me about my final collages is that they have the presence of abstract paintings (they look like the work of an abstract painter) and yet everything before your eyes is a photograph. The pioneers of photographic collage in the early twentieth century could not have dreamt of such a unification of painterly and technological processes.



Illustration 26: *Painting/Pumpkin chopping*



Illustration 27: *Paint blobs/Cherry tomatoes*



Illustration 28: *Picking Leaves 2*





Illustration 29: *Painting/Making rice biscuits*



Illustration 30: *Painting/Ploughing*



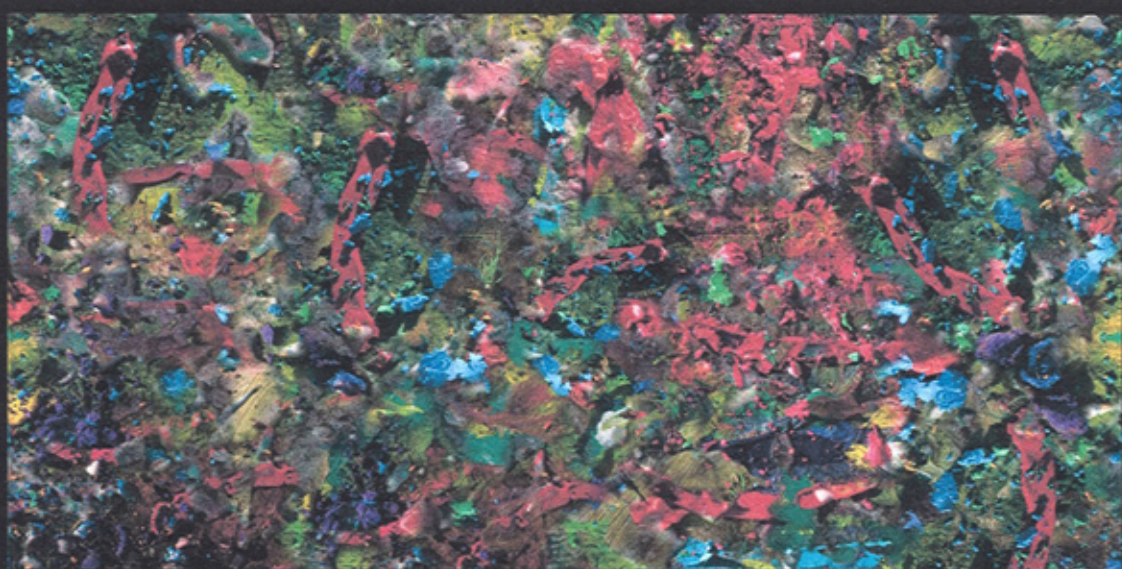


Illustration 31: *Painting/Ploughing 2*



Illustration 32: *Paint flows/ Buffalos in muddy swamps*





Illustration 33: *Painting/Weaving*



## Chapter 4

### **BRAC and the conclusion of my project**

With the final collages complete, to what extent, can I claim that my research has addressed the issues and concerns with which I began when I registered for a PhD in 2000? At the point that my project was given approval to proceed I had three objectives:

- 1) to find out what I could do to answer the challenge of being a Thai artist interested in rural themes
- 2) to understand the value of these themes for present-day rural communities in Thailand, for artists based in Bangkok and for international art audiences
- 3) to promote truly contemporary forms of rural art through the inauguration of BRAC in my home village of Banpao

At the mid-point review of my project I modified the scope of these targets. I now hoped to (1) achieve a philosophy for practising fine art in contemporary rural Thailand by (2) making the rural occupations of Banpao villagers correspond with my activities as an artist so that (3) BRAC, once fully established, would inform and support other artists and researchers interested in the concept of rural art.

Thus the challenge of making contemporary Thai rural art now involved not just my practice but also a philosophy of practice. By the word philosophy I meant an attitude or set of attitudes that would provide me with 'guiding principles' as I set about developing a rural arts centre in Banpao.

This thesis has followed this plan by (1) exploring in the Introduction the issues that arise for artists through the metropolitan/rural divide of contemporary visual arts; (2) by examining in Chapter 1 the range of ideas needed to understand and develop the nostalgia often felt in relation to rural origins; (3) by documenting and evaluating (in Chapter 2) the difficulties experienced by Bangkok artists in understanding the actual contemporary Thai rural environment; and, finally (4),



by describing in Chapter 3 the artistic journey I undertook in order to establish both a contemporary rural practice and a rural arts centre in my home village.

As I begin the concluding chapter of my thesis I can see that the principles that have guided me during the project have evolved since I began my research. The position outlined in the Introduction was initiated by a worry that the dynamics of contemporary rural life were not addressed by either Western imports such as installation and video art (see p.11) or the more indigenous art forms that Bangkok artists used to sentimentalised the Thai identity. However, by the time I had conducted interviews with these artists, I was aware that sentimentality and nostalgia had philosophical implications that needed further investigation and, as a result, was building a theoretical platform using the writings of Marcel Proust. Chapter 3 deals with the progress of my own artistic practice and recounts the struggle I experienced as I tried to separate the most active and creative aspects of nostalgic yearning from the more dominant therapeutic aspects. At this stage I was confident (as I had flagged in the Introduction (p.16)) that nostalgia could serve as an investigatory tool even though this position flies in the face of the view that nostalgia 'knows no history', is 'dishonestly selective', 'defeatist' and 'reactionary' (Harrison, 1991: pp. 124 – 125). The methodological framework in which I was allowing nostalgia to be a guiding principle was practice-led and, as I discovered in my photographic collages, the concept of Proustian reverie had a great deal of subversive power. I called this discovery 'immediate nostalgia'. The body of practical work (the final collages) that I produced by exploring immediate nostalgia in urban Newcastle and rural Banpao led me to a philosophy of practice that I now make the central topic of this concluding chapter.

One text guided the development of my practice from an exploration of immediate nostalgia to a platform of ideas that, through the presence of the final collages at BRAC, clarify how art objects can speak both to a present-day village community and to artists and art audiences operating within the metropolitan contexts of contemporary art. The text in question was written by the American Pragmatist philosopher John Dewey (introduced above on p.111) and published under the title 'Art as Experience' (1958). In this book, Dewey makes a clear distinction between the 'work of art' and the 'art product'. Before

proceeding, it is worth noting that this binary division adds a final 'balance' idea to my project. From the metropolitan/rural divide with which I started, to Carlson's interweaving of knowing and feeling, the process of juxtaposition has occurred, like a leitmotif, throughout my thesis. The philosophy of practice that follows from Dewey's ideas is constructed on the 'balanced' opposition of 'art work as activity' and 'art work as product'.

## **A consideration of artistic and village work**

Dewey gave as much status to the work undertaken by an artist as to the object produced. The experience of making art is, he claims, a vital part of the experience of viewing art objects. 'Experience' for Dewey is 'that which intensifies the sense of immediate living' (Sarason, 1988: 84-86). It does not matter if you are making or viewing art, the intensification of the immediate must be continuous with ordinary life. Dewey's book sought to:

[...] restore continuity between the refined and intensified forms of experience that are works of art and the everyday events, doings, and sufferings that are universally recognised to constitute experience. (Cited in Ridley, 1995: 321)

When artworks are displayed in museums and galleries, Dewey argued, aesthetic responses are artificially separated from common experience. It is the presence of the concept of 'work' in the term 'artwork' that points to the actual site of aesthetic significance shared by all human beings. The common nature of this 'experience' was lost when museums began incarcerating art by putting walls between prized cultural objects and their social contexts, depriving them of a real 'place' in the world, the place in which they were made.

Thus Dewey privileged the role of context and it was the strong role of localized context in British rural art that made me want to pursue my PhD project at Northumbria University. As discussed at the beginning of the thesis, the highly situated practices of the Brotherhood of Ruralists and environmental artists such as David Nash made me sense that there was 'know-how' in Britain that could be, I hoped, usefully transferred to Thailand.



In particular, I could see that British environmental art differed from its American counterpart. British artists like Richard Long had a hands and feet engagement with the landscape. In contrast, American artists such as Robert Morris used heavy machinery to achieve dramatic spectacles in the midst of vast empty terrain. Long is on record as saying:

I can move stones around, to use time, space, distance. [...] So I would like to think that my *work* explores a lot of interesting ideas where I'm walking around the world and moving a few of its materials around, leaving traces, but in a discreet, intelligent way. (My italics. Cited in Gooding & Furlong, 2002: 128)

All artists use the term 'work' but Long's qualification 'discreet' reinforces the idea that the works in question involve little more than a pedestrian excursion taking photographs along the way. In this case 'work' is not only a modest noun but also an understated verb and this underlines the fully immersive nature of this artist's engagement with the environment. He is discreetly being part of the landscape.

Furthermore, Long has a regional background that Gooding and Furlong suggest links his artistic career to his youthful experiences of the landscape of the English West Country. I recognise the following statement as the kind of nostalgia found in many artists with a rural upbringing: 'you could go all round the world' writes Long 'and not find better mud than in the Avon' (2002: 139).

Furthermore, there is also an element of temporal nostalgia in Long's practice:

Mucking about in mud, and playing with rocks and sticks are part of childhood. And Long, who used the children's rhyme 'five, six, pick up sticks / seven, eight, lay them straight' to entitle a 1980 publication, freely admits this connection. (Adams and Robins. 2000: 171)

And so we have a viable contemporary art form (celebrated in major art museums around the world) that is immersed in a non-metropolitan context, and also capable of admitting sentimental and nostalgic feelings. Most importantly, Long's approach *works* as rural work *works*. He expresses a preference for simple honest work (in contrast to his North American colleagues) and, from the standpoint of non-Western cultures, it is difficult to disconnect this predilection from the Arts and Crafts movement inaugurated by John Ruskin. Early

exponents of the movement (such as William Morris) moved to the country to be nearer to what Bermingham describes as the homely, stable and historical (1986: 9). With both Long and Nash, the intensified work of rural walking and woodland management continues customs that can only be found in the countryside. These customs are a form of cognitive appreciation (working in Banpao taught me this) that maximise non-cognitive experiences (Ruskin clearly saw this as the point of 'simple' work and Dewey surely thought the same).

## **A consideration of art (and village) objects**

Whilst the final collages were hanging on the wall inside the BRAC studio they continued to evoke all kinds of non-cognitive responses. The surfaces of collages such as *Muddy Field* were very ambiguous. The mud was just as easily read as chocolate and this association aroused in me nostalgic feelings for the Western foods that I was beginning to miss in my first weeks at home. In my studio, I now had a way of reminiscing about everyday life in Newcastle. I could use the *Muddy Field* collage to narrate my Newcastle lifestyle to my family and neighbours. This form of free association was an extension of the process of immediate nostalgia from the place of work to the place of reception and interpretation. This was not exactly a new idea. I noted above my changing reactions to the finished collage *Bath/Pond* which at first felt dreamy and then increasingly troubling as I associated its frothy surface with chemical pollution (see Chapter 3, p. 99).

Until now I have been describing my artworks as the concluding part of a process that begins with immediate nostalgia experienced in various places of work. For example, I was reminded of working with wet oil paint whilst sowing rice in a muddy field. Now, a finished collage was operating as a trigger for sudden-moment nostalgia. Dewey says that the act of making art:

[...] is directed by the intent to produce something that is enjoyed in the immediate experience of perceiving [...]. The artist embodies in himself the attitude of the perceiver while he works. (1958: 48)

Seeing art in the context in which it is produced allows the 'immediate experience of perceiving' to spill over from the artist into the surrounding



community of appreciators. BRAC was going to be more than a site of production, it was also going to be a viewing space.

It is important to understand that the villagers already knew how to use studio spaces as sites of reception. Remember, in Banpao I involved myself not just in farm work and gardening, but also in a wide range of activities that would be thought of as craftwork in England. For example, the villagers make their own fabrics, matting, and baskets. These types of village work have sites of production and, to paraphrase Dewey, involve the villagers in a process of 'perceiving while working'. Clearly, from the UK perspective (and institutions such as Silpakorn University which treats the applied arts as equal to fine art [see Chapter Introduction, p.5]), village craftwork appears to be very like studio work. It is a closer juxtaposition of cognitive worlds than the farm and the studio. If the final collages on view at BRAC were art products (seamlessly derived from what Dewey called 'art work'), then so were the beautiful baskets that Swai stacked on the shelves at the back of his 'work' room.

Once the final collages were on show at BRAC, I found that my neighbours had a keen sense of the beauty of surface qualities. They responded to the shallow space of the collages in the same way that they enjoyed the woven surfaces of their matting and baskets. My task at BRAC, given the ideas I had adopted from environmental artists such as Richard Long, was to extend this enjoyment of surfaces to farm work and farm products. With the *Muddy Field* collage, my hope was that the pleasure Po Lerm feels as he sows seeds in the rice field, and the enjoyment I have heard him express when surveying the beautifully organised land he farms, could be 'balanced' with both the 'work' and the 'products' of my studio. This is, I believe, the missing ingredient that Thai artists need to understand in order to produce rural art that is as progressive as that of Long and Nash.

## **A critique of Thai rural art using the framework of Dewey's philosophy of artwork and art product**

In the West there has been a sequence of visual arts developments that have not reached Thailand. I think of this sequence as a historical narrative that stretches from art about 'figures in the landscape' during the eighteenth century to art about 'work on the land' in the 1960s.

Art historians have noted the absence of the working figure in rural art. For example, W. J. T. Mitchell (1994: 15) has described how, on large country estates, agricultural labourers were kept out of sight in case they spoil the owner's philosophical contemplation of natural beauty. John Barrell has written about the rural poor struggling to survive in the missing 'dark side of the landscape' (1980: 22). According to Barrell, this prejudice was carried over into paintings in the celebrated landscapes of Richard Wilson (1713 – 1782) who only included workers as 'objects of colour insufficiently particularised to contribute anything to our sense of meaning of his picture' (1980: 6).



Illustration 1: Richard Wilson, *Extensive Landscape with Lake and Cottages*, c.1744-45



Barrell quotes a telling anecdote from Unvedale Price's famous book *Essays on the Picturesque* in which Wilson describes the view from Richmond Hill to Sir Joshua Reynolds using the term 'figures' as though the men and women they could both clearly see before their eyes were no more than components in his pictorial composition (1980: 17). The point being made is that, in the eighteenth century, working people in the landscape 'operated in paintings as aesthetic, not social constraints' (p. 18) and the first part of my short historical narrative on rural work concerns the picturesque conventions in which agricultural activity is entirely absent in rural art.

As a result, when eighteenth century painters did decide to depict farm workers, for example in George Stubbs paintings *The Reapers* and *The Haymakers*, they are arranged like figures in a Greek temple frieze. No trace of dirt can be seen on their clothing nor are there any signs of hardship in their demeanour (Barrell, 1980: 25 and Mullins, 1985: 53).



Illustration 2: George Stubbs's *The Reapers*, 1784



Illustration 3: *The Haymakers*, 1785

Although Constable clearly had a strong social conscience and certainly noticed poverty and social unrest in rural communities (his figures often wore tattered clothing and he also made notes about rick burning in his sketch books) his paintings still operate within the picturesque tradition. For, wherever his sympathies lay, Constable was still selling art to collectors who wanted the countryside to be a rural arcadia. Within this well-established convention, the rural labourer was 'regarded as living a happier life than his richer urban counterpart' (Jenkins, 2000: 14). It is not difficult to see a parallel here with Jintana Piamsiri's photographic expeditions to Thai villages in which she ignores the presence of modern technology (see Chapter 2, p. 59). This is therapeutic nostalgia at work and the situation in Thailand, as my samples of Bangkok artists show, still approximates the idealised, 'distanced' view known in the West as the picturesque.

However, by the nineteenth century Europe had moved on. The growth of realism, the invention of photography and the Impressionist revolution eroded



the concept of the picturesque. A good example is the French painter Claude Monet (1840 – 1926). His paintings were revolutionary in that they seemed to increase the acuity of the artist's eye. It was as if no painter had been able to 'see' so much of the visual world before. As a result, even if artists (with an interest in rural subjects) were not politically or socially motivated, they would still look harder at the actual landscape and therefore paint the real people who worked within and on it.

Whilst elements of the picturesque remained in Monet's work (his famous studio at Giverny reveals how he strove to create a landscape around his house and beyond his garden that embodied the kinds of rural views he wanted to paint), the late water lily paintings, with their experimental curved surfaces, attempt to place the viewer in the picture. Monet called his discovery 'enveloppe' (Zeidler, 2000: 68 and 83) and it seems to me that this concept anticipates the Land Art of the late twentieth century in that it tries to supersede the notion of picturesque distance with an immersion of both viewer and artist in the landscape experience.

Standing before Monet's paintings in Paris we are meant to feel as though we are surrounded by the world, as though one's contact with nature is 'close-up'. These paintings are apprehended as Monet himself experienced nature as he painted: by 'immersing [him]self in [nature's] sights, sounds and sensations' (Lübbren, 2001: 90).

The British environmental artists are in many ways the heirs to Monet's *plein aire* experiments. Richard Long and David Nash 'associate themselves, theoretically and in practice, with landscape gardening, and their installations, 'displacements', or other 'marked sites' are designed to be experienced within the context of the landscape environment' (Andrews, 1999: 204).<sup>1</sup> This is, for me, the final triumph of Dewey's continuum of artwork and art product, the

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that Long's practice is more often likened to that of a global traveller, sometimes with distinctly colonial associations (Adams and Robins, eds., 2000:162-172). However his creative practice, in its first-hand engagement with, and movement through, the landscape does have implications for any artist interested in 'green' thinking (Andrews, 1999:215) and it is in this sense that I have used Long's art in this thesis as an example of working in the natural environment.

sharing by artist and audience of the 'immediate experience of perceiving' in the same physical, social and cultural context.

I think that the journey from art about 'figures in the landscape' to art about 'work on the land' is captured in the theories of Allen Carlson. He distinguishes three modes of appreciating the natural environment: (1) the picturesque approach which 'valorises mountains and lakes at the expense of more ordinary landscapes' (2003) and robs agricultural land of aesthetic value; (2) the objective approach which focuses on the design of the countryside and reduces the complexities of the natural environment (agricultural or otherwise) to its formal interest; and (3) the environmental approach which (most compellingly for Carlson) unites the experience of appreciation with our actual presence in the landscape. Carlson (1978) points out that (1) and (2) maintain the distance of the viewer and do not require the complete range of our senses, whereas (3) immerses us, as Gooding says the British environmental artists do, in the 'light, sound, temperature and texture' of the actual landscape (2002: 12). It seems that Long and Nash embody Carlson's ideas in that they make Land Art that takes in the whole experience of being in the natural environment.

To underline the environmental engagement of the British artists I am going to describe David Nash's sculpture *Ash Dome*. In 1973 he planted a ring of ash saplings on a hill in North Wales and began a working method that has continued to the present day.



Illustration 4: *The Ash Dome*



Nash has pruned and tended the trees for over thirty years and they now form an extraordinary hemispherical vault. To describe environmental sculptures like *Ash Dome*, the artist outlines his three-part strategy of artistic production:

- 1) The sculptures should work with the environment using the materials and conditions the forest naturally has to offer.
  - 2) The sculptor should acknowledge the relationship of the forest and those who work it; using their materials and tools and calling on their experience of planting, growing, tending and cutting.
  - 3) The placing of the sculptures should activate otherwise neutral spaces and not occupy areas that already have a positive sense of 'place'.
- (Cited in Davies & Knipe, 1984: 103)

These points capture the way in which an artist like Nash immerses his practice in the landscape. Not only do his sculptures have to 'work' with the environment around them, the sculptor also has to acknowledge the experience and influence of those who 'work' within the forest. Thus we have a philosophy of practice that is comparable to Dewey's concept of *artwork*.

I began this history of rural work and rural art because I wanted to understand how the aesthetic value of agricultural activities in Banpao could be 'balanced' with my creative practices at BRAC. I claimed that this was the missing ingredient holding up the development of rural art in Thailand. At the conclusion of my PhD project I remain convinced that Nash's approach is the best model for future rural arts projects at BRAC.

Furthermore, it has become clear through my research in the UK that neither Nash nor Long are exceptional. There is a well-established tradition of artists working (in all the senses that Nash uses the word) in rural contexts and, throughout the British Isles, one can find countless projects that operate at a level of ambition and contemporaneity that would be unthinkable in my homeland.

The appendix to this thesis contains details of the arts centres and artists I documented whilst travelling around Britain visiting rural arts projects. In order to draw this chapter to a close I want to briefly describe two organisations that have influenced the way in which I intend to proceed at BRAC:

## (1) Littoral Arts Trust

Littoral Arts is based in Manchester but involves itself in rural projects throughout the UK. Its aim is to draw attention to the diverse ways in which artists can combine their creative practices with the cultural life of farming communities. The director, Ian Hunter (in Littoral Arts, 2003: 18), says that the central arguments for the work undertaken by the Trust are that:

- 1) the arts and agriculture belong together
- 2) agriculture is a form of cultural practice
- 3) farming communities have their own distinct creative traditions
- 4) agriculture sits at the heart of culture – urban and rural

The political position of this artist-led organisation is comparable to the views of the environmental aesthetician Pauline Von Bonsdorff who has written that 'the farmer has an irreplaceable competence for appreciating the character of the agricultural landscape' (2003: 6). For Bonsdorff, farmers are amongst 'the most competent perceivers' in the environment, an idea that interweaves agricultural and artistic practices in a manner that Dewey would have both recognised and celebrated.

## (2) Grizedale Forest Sculpture Project

Situated in the English Lake District, this famous arts centre was inaugurated as a sculpture trail in the extensively forested landscape around Grizedale in 1977. Because the Centre has maintained a high profile as a site of experimental practices, the organisation is able to develop ambitious projects in relation to the local community. In particular, it specialises in residency programmes that provide both time and freedom to artists to select and understand the sites in which they make works. As a result, their outreach projects try to establish correspondences between current forms of creative production (by both urban and rural artists) and local agricultural industries and businesses.

As I reach the closing lines of my thesis, it seems that I can reasonably claim to have met two of the targets set at the mid-point review and made considerable progress toward achieving the third. I have a philosophy of practice that guides my activities as a rural artist. I also have a body of completed artworks created



out of the correspondence of agricultural work and fine art practice. As to the third objective, I can point to the range of rural art centres and projects documented in the appendix to indicate the significance of my research to the future of BRAC. The concept of an art centre in Thailand is still new. Apart from Damrong's project in the suburbs of Bangkok, there are a handful of galleries in the capital city that run educational workshops and a few isolated cases of artist-in-residence schemes. However, before the inauguration of BRAC nobody had understood the important model that organisations such as Littoral Arts and the Grizedale sculpture project could provide in informing and supporting Thai artists in the development of rural art. This is the research platform I have sought to establish with my doctoral project: the rural-based artist in Britain and Thailand: an investigation into the creative processes by which artists have rejected the metropolitan context of contemporary art.

## Appendix

### **The development of Banpao Rural Art Centre (BRAC)**

#### **Introduction**

BRAC is both a starting point and a destination of this PhD research. Whilst my practical research seeks innovative approaches to 'rural art' in Thailand, the aim for BRAC is to provide a base for myself and other artists to pursue these practices in a genuinely rural context.

BRAC is a pioneering enterprise. It is certainly the first project in Thailand to draw together the concept of rural art and the idea of an arts centre at a non-metropolitan location. My thesis has explored the practical and theoretical issues involved in being a contemporary rural artist and therefore, in this appendix, I will turn to the idea of a rural arts centre. I here provide information about the development of my thinking about arts centres, rural arts projects and artist-in-residence schemes. All of these forms of arts management are part of my ongoing plans for BRAC.

What is regarded as an art centre in Thailand is often an art gallery that runs art workshops for young people. The main public galleries in which they take place are the National Art Gallery, the National Museum and the art galleries of major universities. Outside the capital, only a few universities have fine art departments and art galleries that operate a workshop programme. The major ones are Chiangmai University (in the North) and Konkean University (Northeast). There are also numerous commercial art galleries in Bangkok and at popular tourist locations such as Phuket which run classes for children and high-school students who are preparing for the university entrance examination. A few private galleries in Bangkok such as Tadu and About Studio/About Café organise artist-in-residence projects.

The only art centres that are located outside the Thai cities are local craft projects, which are non-institution based and aim to preserve folk art and crafts.



For example, the Ngao Community Art Centre is a family-run wood carving centre. It was set up by a northern craftsman, Kham-ai Dejduangta, in Lumpang Province. His original aim was to build a place to display his own work. However Kham-ai extended his idea to include traditional wood carving classes for local youngsters. This is typical of small crafts facilities throughout Thailand: the idea is usually initiated by a single practitioner who wants to support local traditions and the income that turns an individual workshop into a 'centre' that others can use is always derived from the sale of craftworks and donations. Therefore, BRAC is in many ways a unique undertaking in that it is organised around the practice of fine art and is based on community models successfully developed in Britain over the past thirty years. I will now describe the research I undertook in the UK to plan BRAC.

### **Arts centres in Britain**

Art centres in Britain receive support from art funding systems such as the Arts Council of England and local authorities. There has been a rapid growth in the numbers of arts centres in Britain since the 1970s. According to a survey conducted by the Policy Study Institution (PSI)<sup>1</sup>, 50% of arts centres in Britain started in the 1970s, 30% during 1980-1985 (Hutchison and Forresters, 1987:7). For research in this area, John Lain (1978) was amongst the first to undertake a full-length of survey into the enormous variety of arts centre in Britain, which led to his publication *Art Centres: Every Town Should Have One*. Since then there have been several researches concerning art centres and their management. Many of them were supported by the Art Council and PSI. For example, Hutchison and Forrester (1987) studied 242 arts centres in the UK. Their research publication provided details of the funding, organisation and activities of arts centres. They made a thorough examination of the organisation and activities within the framework of their new taxonomy of arts centres. Another comprehensive research on arts centres (a report presented for the Art Council of England) was authored by Joy MacKeith. Her report provides an overview of arts centres in the 1990s and identifies the factors that lead to success (1996: i).

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<sup>1</sup> Policy Studies Institute (PSI) is a non-profit independent research institute, conducting research to promote economic well-being and improve quality of life. PSI was formed in 1978 It merged to become an independent subsidiary of the University of Westminster since 1998. Information of this institute can be found in <http://www.psi.org.uk>.

Other publications such as Branden's (1978) *Artists and People*; Chong's (2002) *Arts Management*; and Pick's (1980) *Arts Administration* also provide extensive information on centres in Britain. At Northumbria University, a current research project by Kevin Stephens explores the nature of arts residencies through their past and present manifestations. Stephens looks forward to the future when artists will be employed to work in communities on a full-time basis<sup>2</sup>.

### **What is an art centre?**

In the above studies, there are debates on what art centres are and how they can function in the future. John Lain observes that originally the term was used to describe a purpose-built building, in which activities of more than one art form took place and people of different interests and backgrounds came into social contact with one another. If we consider the variety of art activities in different art centres, the term can embrace a wide variety of forms. It does not need to be restricted to a specific building but can describe projects which make use of existing community facilities (1978: ix-1).

In their research into 242 centres in Britain, Hutchison and Forrester (1987) categorise arts centres into six types:

1. Professional urban centres (98 in UK)  
Professionally directed and managed centres in towns and cities with particularly strong commitment to professional work.
2. Voluntary urban centres (32)  
Centres that were often originally created by the voluntary efforts of local enthusiasts; usually with a small non-specialist staff and a commitment to providing facilities for local amateur use.
3. Community arts and community centres (50)  
Either with a localized focus/catchment area, or centres set up predominantly to serve a community of interest, for example, one or more ethnic minorities.
4. Rural centres (20)  
Usually with a wide catchment area and in villages or small towns with fewer than 12,500 people; at least ten miles from an urban or metropolitan area.
5. Arts centres for young people (14)  
Largely or exclusively geared to the needs of those under 25.

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<sup>2</sup> See his seminar paper: Kevin Stephens (2001) *Artists in Residence—Past, Present and Future*. Newcastle upon Tyne: University of Northumbria, Centre for Cultural Policy Research, School of Humanities. See also his report with findings and recommendation published later in the same year. (For full reference: Kevin Stephens (2001) *Artists in Residence—Past, Present and Future: report with findings and recommendation*. Newcastle upon Tyne: University of Northumbria, Centre for Cultural Policy Research, School of Humanities.)



6. Centres at schools, colleges and universities (28)  
Not predominantly for young people – characteristically bridging organizations between educational institutions and the wider world. (Pp.3-4)

The following is a brief account of studies that provided me with useful information for BRAC's development:

**1. A study of the North Tyneside Art Studio, January 2001.**

This study provided examples of artists working *within* and *for* the community. The Studio is a voluntary organisation. It provides studio space and running art sessions for people who have difficulties arising from illness or social problems. It also hosts students on work placement. Staff members are expected to develop their own arts practice as well as organise activities for others.

**2. A study of the Northern Print Studio, August 2001.**

Northern Print is the regional resource for printmaking in the North East. It provides specialist workshops and provides access to printmaking equipment for artists, schools and the public. The studio also runs regular classes; open-access facilities for members; technical support; exhibitions; fellowships and residencies. The Studio is not a large organisation but nevertheless has all the necessary facilities and programmes that generate a creative atmosphere that stimulates innovative artwork.

**3. A research and rolling seminar project for the 'Year of the Artist', 'Artists in Residence- Past, Present and Future', by Northumbria University's Centre for Cultural Policy Research, at Queen's Hall, Hexham. 2nd February, 2001.**

This seminar provided an overview of how artists in Britain operate. There were discussions about the conflict between the expectations of artists and organisers. In the seminar paper, Stephens (2000) sets up a historical and practical perspective of an artists-in-residence scheme in England. He says that

the concept of an artist-in-residence has become popular since the mid-1960s. The reasons for establishing residencies are many but certain common threads emerge. There is above all a desire to bring about the closing of a perceived gap between the artist and society (p. 2).

An artist in residence programme is also a way 'to improve the economic status of individual artist' (Stephens, 2000: 2 quotes the Arts Council Press Release outlining the objectives of Year of the Artist, 2000). Stephens asserts that the terms "fellowship" or "artist placement" (as in the Artist Placement Group (APG), run by John and Barbara Latham from the mid 1960s) were sometime used to describe artists-in-residences. The APG was initially to 'place' artists in industrial or administrative situations. Later artists came to be 'resident' in universities, schools, colleges, prisons, hospital, libraries, museums, art galleries, arts centres, community centres, housing estates and coalfield villages (2000:17). There are debates about artist-in-residence programmes concerning the objectives of funding bodies, agencies, host communities and the artists. Some hosts demand that artists run activities such as workshops for children or create a type of work the community expects rather than allowing experimentation. These activities may benefit the community, but not the artists' creative development. Other programmes emphasise the artists' interests. The residency scheme at Grizedale Arts is an example of the latter approach. It encourages artists to try new ideas in their practice. During the seminar, participants recommended that there should be a flexible attitude by the host and funding body regarding their expectations. A long-term residency (one year and above) is most beneficial for hosts and artists, as they both have time to develop their understanding of each other and the context in which the residency is taking place. Specialist training may also be useful. Stephens (2001) remarks that 'artists who have undertaken residencies frequently find the amount of administration stressful since they have no training in how to deal with it efficiently' (p.9). The priorities of the host organisations are often mysterious to artists.

#### **4. 'Rural Shift: Investing in Rural Creativity; Tackling Rural Social and Economic Exclusion Through the Art', at Agricultural Business**



**Centre, Bakewell, Derbyshire, organised by LITTORAL ARTS, 22nd-23rd October 2002.**

This conference allowed me to learn more about the different types of art centre in rural communities. Many projects that have artists-in-residence programmes seek to find a balance between artistic freedom and running workshops for local children. For example, Visual Arts in Rural Communities (VARC) funds an annual twelve-month artist's residency at Highgreen, Northumberland. Whilst working closely with local schools, VARC encourages young artists to develop their practice in relation to the cycle of the seasons. Other projects (such as High Peak Community Arts, Rural Arts North Yorkshire and Junction Arts in Derbyshire) also organise activities that are beneficial for the development of rural communities.

**5. A study on the Network: Artists in Northumberland (I also gave a public talk at their annual meeting ("Extraordinary General Meeting") at Queen's Hall, Hexham, 16th October 2005.)**

The Network is an association of artists and craftspeople who live in Tynedale and the surrounding area. There are over 200 members. The Network encourages artists to continue their creative practice in their own environment. They run an annual Art Tour, which is an open-studio event that allows the members to meet and discuss their work and interact with the public. The tour is also an opportunity for visitors to purchase artworks.

## **Case studies**

**1. Waygood Gallery**, an artist-led gallery and studio based in Newcastle. (Information obtained from my visit to the Waygood and an interview with the director, Helen Smith in November 2001.)<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Some information can be found in the Waygood's website: <http://www.waygood.org>



Illustration 1 Waygood's office



Illustration 2: Artists' studio section



Illustration 3: Exhibition space



Illustration 4: Reception area

## History and mission

Waygood is an art gallery that provides studio spaces for artists to rent. It is situated in the city of Newcastle. Waygood was founded in 1995 by a Newcastle born artist, Helen Smith. Her objective was to achieve a national visibility of her practice, but still work in the Northeast of England. Smith said that most artists go to London to establish themselves in the art world. Therefore, her aim for the Waygood was to provide a venue that would make staying in Newcastle more interesting at a professional level.

In 1995, Waygood started with only three studio spaces and was self-funded. The first artists to exhibit were people Smith knew. These artists paid for their own transport and exhibition costs. However the Waygood had a small budget for publicity.

By the time of my interview the Waygood had grown bigger. The gallery is about three times its original size. There are twenty-two artists working in the studios with around thirty people on the waiting list. There is also a growing audience



and an extensive mailing list. Because the building needs regeneration the rent rate is not high. The artists only pay £25 per month for one studio space. They are happy to have a low cost studio space in the middle of the city.

The Waygood now receives public funding. As a result Smith is employed by the City Council as director. She works four days a week and does her own painting the rest of the time. Waygood also has an administrator who works three and a half days a week and other people who work on a part-time basis. Artists who exhibit their work in the gallery are paid the standard exhibition fee of £300.

### **Waygood's public funding**

The funding Waygood receives is divided into 3 parts:

1. Northern Arts support for the gallery programme.
2. The City Council gives funding for the revenue, which is the core cost.
3. The Arts Council of England supports one-off projects.

Waygood also has income from studio rents and the bar.

Smith remarks that public funding is the most important way of supporting the gallery. If the Waygood did not get public funding, it would not be able to run its programme. It would be just a studio building, in which artists pay for space to work.

## **2. A Case study of Grizedale Arts, an artists-in-residence project based in the heart of famous Lake District National Park.**

(Information obtained from my visit to Grizedale Arts and an interview with the director, Adam Sutherland in September 2003.)<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Some information can be found in Grizedale's website: <http://www.grizedale.org> and various publications on Grizedale, for example Grant, B. and Harris, P. (eds.) (1991) *The Grizedale Experience: Sculpture, Arts & Theatre in a Lakeland Forest*. Edinburgh: A Paul Harris Book for Canongate Press; Grant, B. and Harris, P. (eds.) (1996) *Nature Order: Visual Arts and Crafts in Grizedale Forest Park*. Cumbria: The Grizedale Society; and Davies, P. and Knipe, T. (eds.) (1984) *A Sense of Place: Sculpture in Landscape*. Sunderland: Sunderland Arts Centre.



Illustration 5: Grizedale Forest



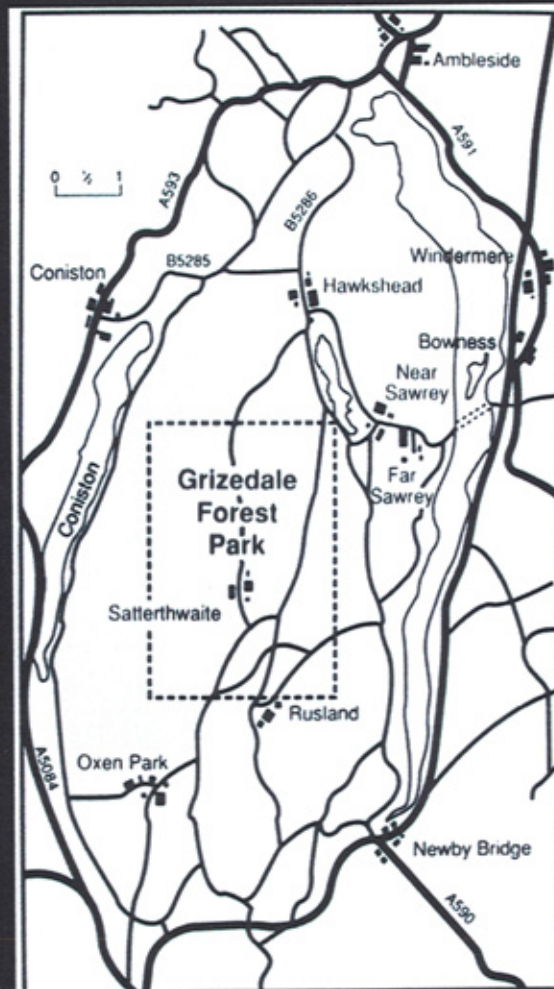


Illustration 6: Map of Grizedale Forest

The office of Grizedale Arts is in the Grizedale Forest Visitor Centre in the Lake District, in the north-west of England. The forest, which is owned and managed by the Forestry Commission covers 8,700 acres. It lies between Lake Windermere and Coniston Water. Grizedale Arts was established in 1977 by the Grizedale Society. The idea of bringing arts to the forest came from Bill Grant, the Forestry Commission's manager at the time. Grant had undertaken a Churchill fellowship to look at forests in America, and was inspired by the mix of arts and forestry he found. Initially the Grizedale Society, which Grant set up after his return to the United Kingdom in 1968 concentrated on the performing arts, but with the assistance of Peter Davis and Northern Arts, the sculpture project was established. Grizedale was among the first Forestry Commission forests to offer wide access to the public. Bill Grant says that the Grizedale sculpture project 'was a new and exiting venture, offering wonderful possibilities

of bringing sculptors out of their urban studios and providing a challenge for them to create works in natural outdoor sites' (cited in Davies and Knipe (eds.), 1984: 74). He remarks

Many young sculptors have become established at Grizedale [...] The experience of being in a small local community, and with the challenge of a nine thousand acre forest, with around sixty works already in situ, has the effect of stretching and releasing young sculptors from previous inhibitions and working methods. A residency at Grizedale sends them away quite different people and so more complete artists (Grant and Harris (eds.), 1991: 10).

The first sculptors in residence were Richard Harris and David Nash, both of whom worked in the forest for over a year. The initial aim of the forest sculpture project was to establish a non-metropolitan situation for the artists to develop new work. It was only later that the public was addressed. At Grizedale, artists engaged not only with the forest environment but also with local people and schools. The Northern Arts Visual Arts Officer, Peter Davies, who encouraged the founding of the forest sculpture scheme, says

The vitality of the project springs from the sculptor's response to the working forest and the questions it poses for his or her sculptural practice. [...] The artist is given time to work and respond to the space. [...] Grizedale celebrates an individual's response to a particular landscape. (Cited in Grant and Harris (eds.), 1991: 19)

The artists in the sculpture project produce work from materials collected in the forest (e.g. stones and wood). They also often use traditional and local skills. With this approach, the sculptures they make are more likely to be in harmony with the environment. Richard Harris sees the Grizedale as a working forest, where trees, machinery and sculpture can exist and be experienced on the same terms.

Harris says that his *Cliff Structure*, 1978 [Illustration 7] grew out of his interaction with the site. He used slate from the old drystone walls that run through the forest (a left-over from ancient field systems) and windblown oak.





Illustration 7: *Cliff Structure*, 1978 by a Grizedale artist, Richard Harris

Even though the sculptures in Grizedale are left by the artists as finished pieces, they are in a sense “work in progress”. They continue to change with weathering. The work can disappear as it sinks back into the environment in which it was made (cited in Davies and Knipe, (eds.), 1984: 68-69). The artist-in-residence project at Grizedale does not only benefit the artists. Many visitors are inspired by the artworks. As they follow the sculpture trail, they also create small pieces with stones and tree branches. [Illustration 8-9] The main visitors are Lake District hikers, Lancashire day-trippers and schoolchildren. They attract over 150,000 visitors a year (cited in Davies and Knipe (eds.), 1984: 64).



Illustration 8 - Illustration 9: work left by a visitor

In an important sense, Grizedale sculpture project can be seen as a developing form of educational outreach. There is an interesting balance between the private and public roles of the residency schemes. The process of creating art can be serious and private. In such a large forest, the artists only meet a few visitors whilst they are working. They have time and space to work quietly.

However, at Grizedale, the private work of the artists quickly becomes public after they leave the site.

What is unusual about Grizedale, amongst public art schemes, is that it enables a sculptor to combine these aspects of the private and the public, helping to bridge the gap between the two, and because the sculpture is perceived and experienced both in 'work' and a 'leisure' context. [...] Sculpture at Grizedale is clearly seen by the general public in the context of leisure, but for professional foresters, who see it more frequently than anybody else, it is part of their working experience. And they will, for this reason, view it with different criteria. (Davies and Knipe (eds.), 1984: 67)

The current director, Adam Sutherland, who was appointed in 1999, has sought to extend this interplay of private and public. New projects directly involve the public. Sutherland's approach focuses on investigative interaction. They often present existing community activities alongside the work of the artists-in-residence. Recent activities at Grizedale blend the worlds of the local residents and the artists together. For example, *Let's Get Married Today*, September 2003 created an art event with a wedding ceremony for two Grizedale couples.

Another Grizedale project was *Road Show*, May - October 2003, which took artworks, artists and curators on tour to isolated communities across the UK. The programme involved outdoor and gallery events, showcasing a wide range of new work, from live performance to film and video. [Illustration 10-11]





Illustration 10: *Tony's a Winner*, Paul Rooney, 2003. Photo: Carolyn Logan



Illustration 11: *Hour Heel Bar*, Roddy Thomson & Colin Lowe, 2003. Photo: Gethyn Evans

Sutherland said that 'the project became a bonding experience for the participants' (Sutherland in Hand, 2003:7), one that gathers different groups of people together and leaves 'a legacy for further collaborations and new directions for many of the artists and audience' (Sutherland in Hand, 2003:7). *Road Show* was enjoyed by artists and audiences alike. The event demonstrated that the seriousness of innovative art practice can be combined with leisure activities.

### Grizedale Facilities

1. The main office is the centre for administrative work. [Illustration 12-13]  
There are four full-time staff members: director, deputy director (embracing curatorial and marketing roles), educational co-ordinator, forestry and community projects co-ordinator, and two part-time staff: a technician and accountant.



Illustration 12-13: Grizedale office

2. A two-floor building provides exhibition space and craft workshop. The workshop is equipped with woodworking machinery. [Illustration 14-17] Upstairs is a studio space for painters and digital artists. However, since the main art activities take place in the forest and the community, the space is rarely used to produce artwork. Some artists use it for experimental purposes. There are not many exhibitions in the gallery. It is used mainly to display drawing and other documentary work relating to activities that take place out of doors.



Illustration 14: Gallery space



Illustration 15: Studio space



Illustration 16: Digital station



Illustration 17: Wood workshop

3. A ten-bedroom house with *en suite* facilities is the base for artists working at Grizedale. [Illustration 18-19] This is a seventeenth century farmhouse, situated in idyllic surroundings. Grizedale also provides a pickup truck for artists to use during the residency.





Illustration 18-19: Summerhill House, accommodation for artists

### **The selection method for the artists-in-residence scheme**

There is a selection panel, which sometimes includes people from the local community. Prior to the selection process, Grizedale advertises in art magazines. Through a careful placing of advertisements, the director, in effect, screens the applicants before the actual selection process takes place. This helps to reduce conflicts with members of the panel who prefer traditional forms of art. This method allows Sutherland to get the type of artist he wants to bring to Grizedale.

The residency programme at Grizedale is divided into two main sections. First is the research period. Successful applicants (Grizedale takes around ten artists each year) are invited to stay at Grizedale for approximately twenty one days. This period allows the artists to familiarise themselves with the area. At this time the artists have regular meetings with the Grizedale Arts team, in order to make sure that they get appropriate advice and support. At the end of the research period, the artists submit a proposal. The second period of the residency involves the artists realizing their plans in relation to the Grizedale programme of events and publications.

Although Grizedale is funded by the Art Council of England, they also raise money by themselves for particular art projects. Sutherland says that British artists would normally expect to be funded at the Arts Council's standard rate, which is £150 per day. However, Grizedale Arts also pays £60 per day during the research period. This money is raised independently. When the project is approved and the artists are working full time they are supported by the Arts Council.

### **Expectation from the artists in residence**

Sutherland says that even though Grizedale allows artists to work freely, there should be some kind of expectation from the project organiser. Firstly, artists must work hard during the residency. They need to put in effort and energy, build good working relationships and produce interesting art. The idea of working in the forest is that the artists should not do the same thing they normally do in metropolitan contexts. At the end of the residency programme, if the project does not leave a sculpture in the forest, Grizedale may ask for a significant piece of work for their archive.

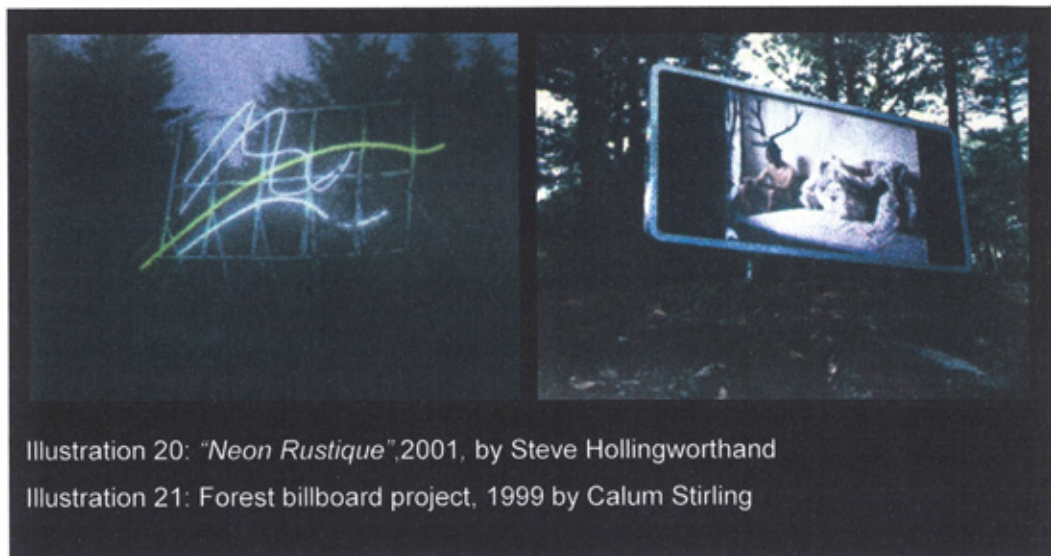
### **The useful models that my research into art centres provides for BRAC can be summarised as following:**

1. Grizedale gives enough time and freedom to the artist to select the site and develop their work. This approach was reinforced by the participants in the seminar, '**Artists in Residence- Past, Present and Future**' (Stephens, 2001: 8), which, as I said above, recommended longer periods of residence to help artists understand the site and the community who belong there.
2. Grizedale provides opportunities for young artists. Consequently, the art is more experimental and leaves creative possibility open.
3. There is an interplay between the private and public roles of artists-in-residence projects. One needs to balance the artists' purpose in developing an artwork and the expectations of audience.
4. The emphasis on the process of close engagement with the forest environment at Grizedale encourages artists to develop new approaches to their art. With this idea the development of an arts centre is no longer about buildings. The artist only needs accommodation and the minimum of studio space. By following this example, BRAC can start to operate at a very low cost. The new BRAC building has three bedrooms and a sixty-three-square metre studio space and this is already sufficient to organise useful projects. However BRAC cannot follow Grizedale's example in terms of funding. At this early stage, BRAC does not receive any public funding. It will not be able to give funding to artists. For that reason, BRAC may only provide a working space. Overseas artists could apply for funding from their own country. Sutherland suggested that, for BRAC, artists will not expect a fee



to work in rural Thailand. Therefore, the method of bringing artists to BRAC needs not start with advertising, but can directly target artists who understand the situation and are willing to work with limited resources.

5. Most art projects at Grizedale, especially in the forest sculptures project, involve some form of correspondence between the artists and the villagers' practices, which is my philosophy at BRAC. The forest sculptures were 'made on site and belonging organically to the location, completing with the forest background, rather than competing with it' (Grant and Harris (eds.) 1996:7). The artists combined their innovative ideas with traditional methods of forestry. In the recent artists-in-residence programmes, since the current director arrived in 1999, although many projects have less to do with the forest, the correspondence has shifted from the artistic and the forestry practices to the corroboration with the locals (for example the wedding project). And despite, the director is particularly interested in bringing city types of art to the forest (for example "*Neon Rustique*", 2001, by Steve Hollingworth and [Illustration 20] and the forest billboard project, 1999 by Calum Stirling) [Illustration 21], the subjects are still related to Lake District communities.



There have been interesting conflicts. Some villagers found the billboard project intrusive. However, Adam Sutherland took this matter as part of the concept of "work-in progress". Thus in 2002 he arranged for the villagers to officially burn down the billboards as part of the Queen's jubilee celebrations. Grizedale made this event a village project and called it *Burn Baby Burn*. [Illustration 22]



Illustration 22: Village project, *Burn Baby Burn*, 2002



## The Design of BRAC

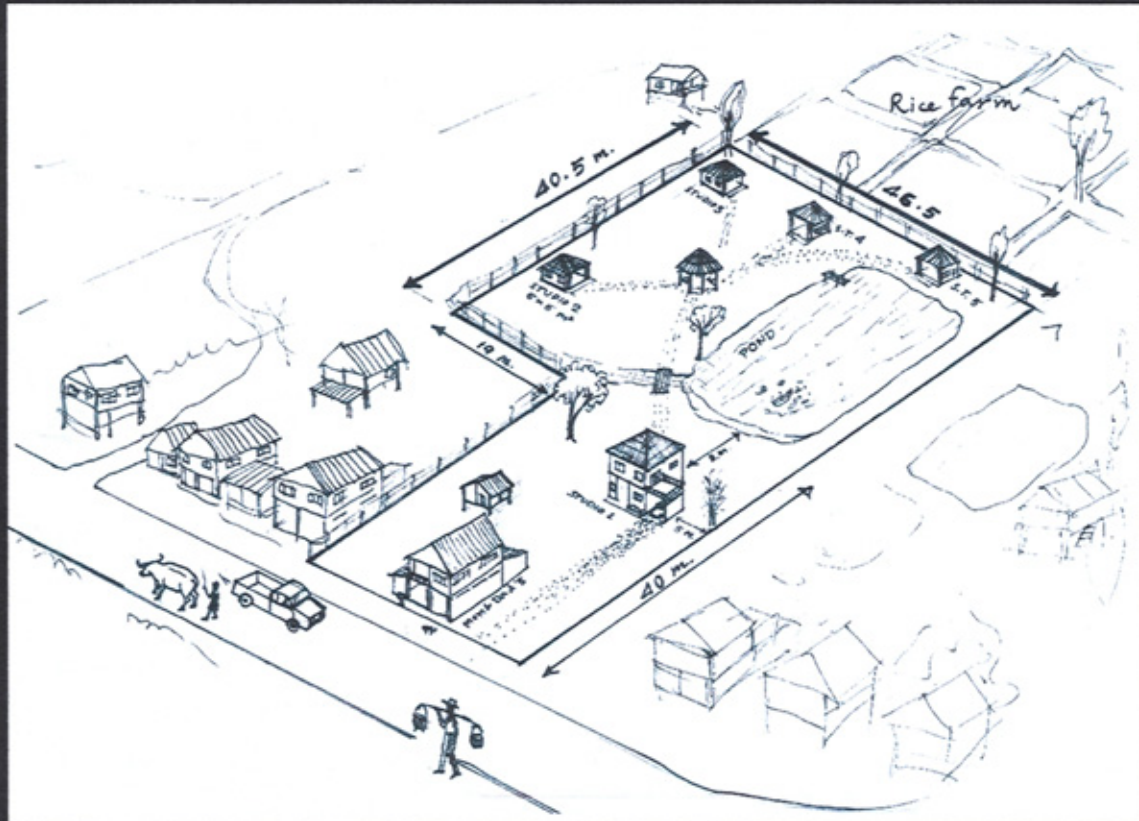


Illustration 23: Map of BRAC location

From all the above case studies I was struck by the range of art centres and residency programmes in Britain. The most useful idea for BRAC was the minimal need of facilities when pursuing out doors activities with the local community. With this approach I developed a plan that would make the organisation of the Centre simple and low cost. The first building was designed to be multi-functional and was constructed during June-November 2001.

[Illustration 24] The ground floor is designed as a studio space and wood workshop. However, it can be transformed into an exhibition and educational facility space. There are also a self-catering and washing area on this floor.

[Illustration 25] Upstairs there are bedrooms, a study, and a bathroom.

[Illustration 26]



Illustration 24: BRAC's building

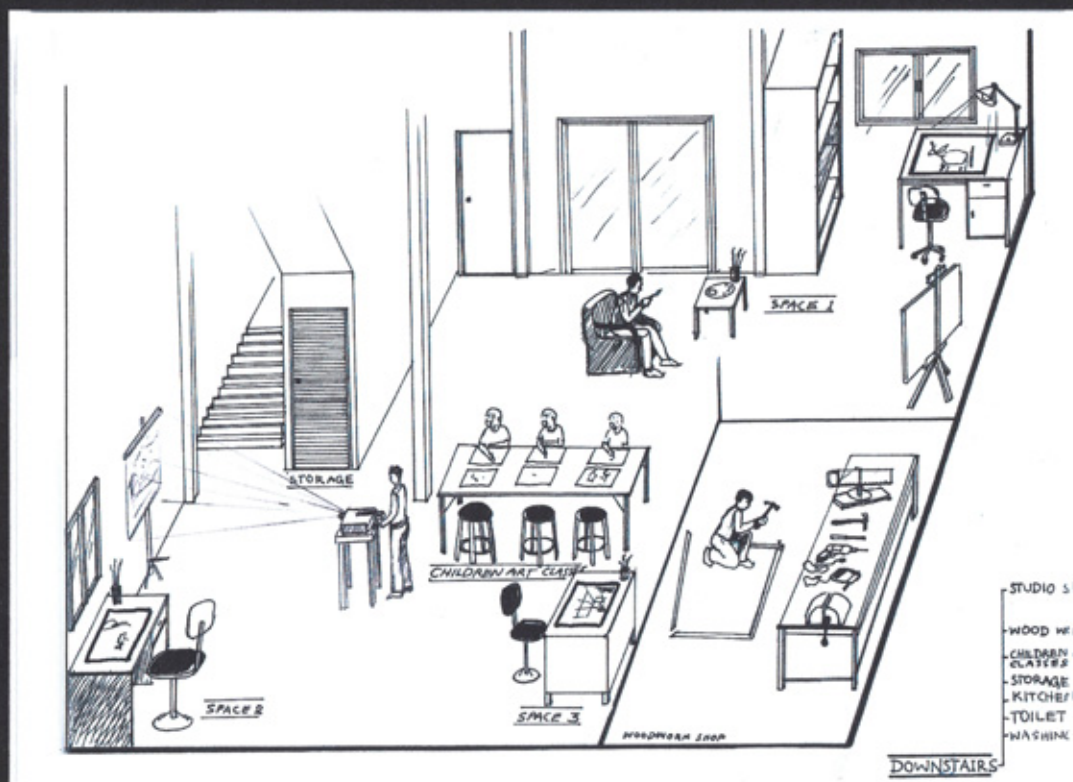


Illustration 25: Ground-floor plan



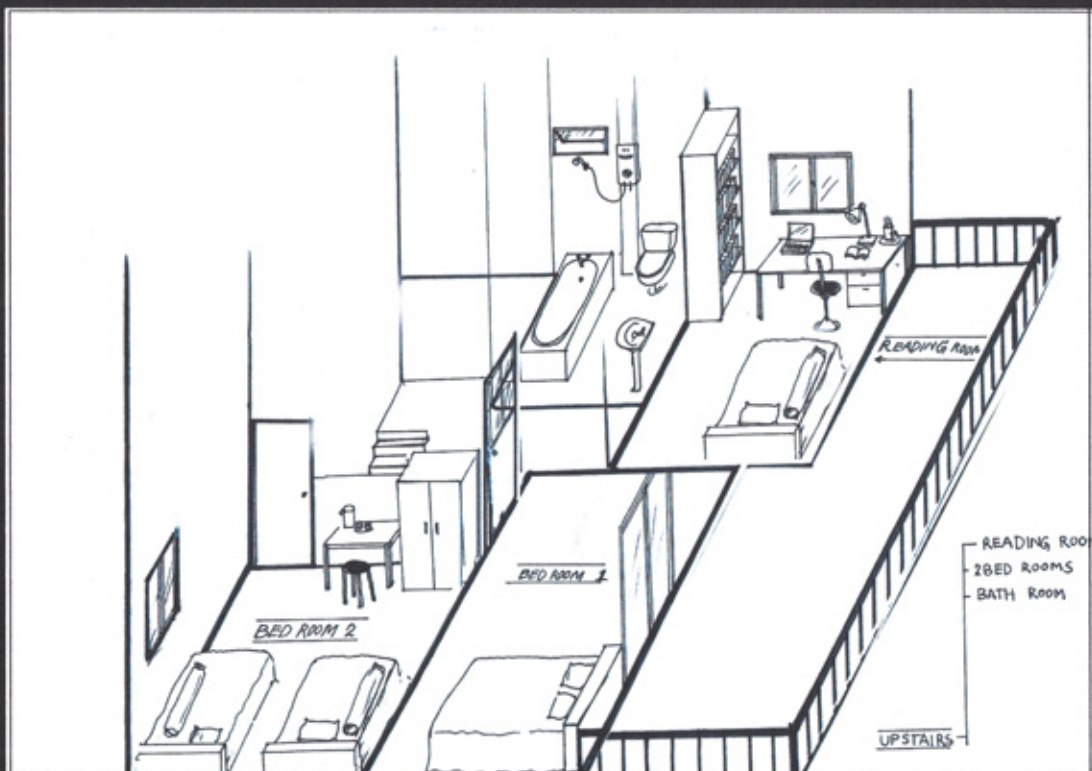


Illustration 26: First-floor plan

## BRAC's Garden



Illustration 27: BRAC's garden



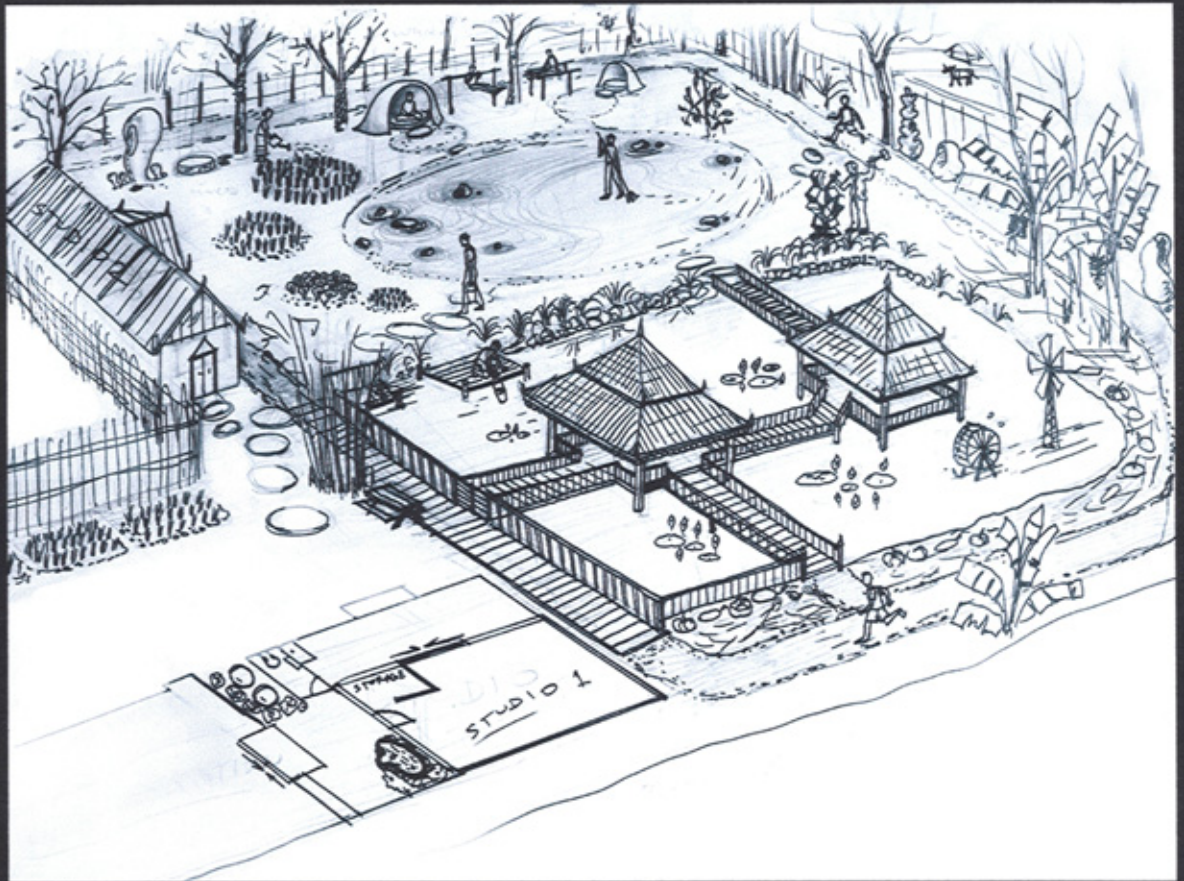


Illustration 28: The latest design of BRAC's garden

BRAC is located in the area of my family's garden, which covers 40x46 square metres, including a pond. [Illustration 27-28] The garden is used for growing various kinds of fruit and vegetables. One area is used for growing cotton. I consider this aspect of BRAC to be interesting for artists. It is a semi-agricultural working garden, which can be transformed through both gardening and art.

In front of BRAC there is a small street, which, in one direction leads to the main road and the village market, and in the other leads to a farm. Both destinations are walking distance away. Therefore, it is easy for artists to explore every aspect of village life. BRAC has neighbouring houses on each side. Behind the garden is a rice field. Until 2000, the pond in BRAC's back garden was used as a water supply and to keep fish. Since the installation of a running water system in 2000, it has been used to grow lotuses.

## **Planning for BRAC's administration and the future artist-in-residence programme**

Like the early development of the Waygood gallery, BRAC is a personal and self-funded project. The first building is situated on my parents' land. The extended garden is my personal property. I was fortunate to get a commission to produce an artwork that earned me enough money to buy this piece of land in 1998. Following this purchase I started to design BRAC. During the travelling exhibition "Rural Realism" in Bangkok, Loei and BRAC, I developed connections with local business people who have already funded some one-off projects at BRAC. In the future, when BRAC is fully operational, there is a possibility that it will receive regular grants from the government and the village council. However it is unlikely that BRAC will be able to fund international artists at the rate of the Arts Council of England. This fee is higher than a month's salary of a schoolteacher in Thailand. Thus, the support that BRAC provides is likely to be limited to the cost of food, accommodation, transportation within the country and the production of artworks. Overseas artists will have to apply for funding in their own country for the return-air fare.

My strategy at BRAC is similar to that at Grizedale. I will give time and freedom to artists to develop their own work. The organiser's duty is to provide an interesting context for artists to work alongside a Thai rural community.

### **BRAC's activities since January 2002**

My own initial residency at BRAC has had positive results. As Chapter 3 demonstrated, my artwork changed drastically whilst I was working at Banpao. Part of this change was due to the good relationship I have with the local community. Educational activities in Banpao village also helped.

#### **1. A seminar with art teachers from local schools under the topic 'Art and Rural Development'**





Illustration 29-30: 'Art and Rural Development' Seminar

As BRAC is the first and the only art centre in the area, the main aim of this seminar was to build up BRAC's connection with local schools. The seminar aimed to inform teachers in the area about the benefit of art centres to a rural community. The contents of the seminar were built around educational workshops and my own practice. We also discussed how the collaboration between artists and farmers can lead to exchanges of creative ideas.



Illustration 31-32: Educational workshops

## 2. Art classes for local children



Illustration 33: Children's art at BRAC

Apart from running workshop in local schools, I also organised art classes at BRAC in weekday evenings and at weekends. Children and their parents were enthusiastic about seeing an artist working in the village. Around fifty children joined the classes during my residency there in 2002.

## 3. An exhibition of the work I produced at Northumbria and during my first residency at BRAC, under the title 'Rural Realism'<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The same set of work was also shown at the Jamjuree Art Gallery, Chulalongkorn University, Bangkok, and at the HRH Princess Siridhorn Art Centre, Loei





Illustration 34-35: 'Rural Realism' Exhibition at BRAC and at Princess Siridhorn Art Centre

Throughout each exhibition, I learnt a great deal about the reactions of different groups of viewers to my work. Interesting responses were gained through observation, discussion and questionnaires handed out during exhibitions. There were also reviews in local newspapers. In the 200 questionnaires that I received back, artists, art students, local politicians and other people expressed a wish to see more artists working on rural sites.

### **Overall feedback from the villagers to the establishment of BRAC**

The villagers welcomed the establishment of the Centre. They were interested in taking part in the activities. Many of them were delighted with the prospect of children's art classes. They said it is a good thing to do after school, especially since drug problems have spread rapidly through rural areas in the recent years. This problem is a consequence of the growth and modernisation of Banpao village. Many children live with grandparents whilst their parents are working in Bangkok. If they feel lonely and have too much free time, it is easier for them to be drawn into drug taking. The villagers agree with me that artistic activities can help to reduce this problem. At least the children have a place to go and do creative things.

The villagers also expressed their enthusiasm for foreign artists coming to work in the community. As Banpao is quite remote and not a tourist destination, there are no visitors from overseas. Consequently, foreign artists are especially welcome.

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